n the past decades, media spectacle has become a dominant form in which news and information, politics, war, entertainment, sports, and scandals are presented to the public and circulated through the matrix of old and new media and technologies.¹ By “media spectacles” I am referring to media constructs that present events that disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, become popular stories that capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smartphones, and other new media and communication technologies. In a global networked society, media spectacles proliferate instantaneously, become
virtual and viral, and give rise to either sociopolitical transformation or mere moments of media hype and tabloidized sensationalism.

Dramatic news and events are presented as media spectacles and dominate certain news cycles. Stories like those of the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the Libyan revolution, the U.K. riots, the Occupy movements, and other major media spectacles of the era cascaded through broadcasting, print, and digital media, seizing people’s attention and emotions and generating complex and multiple effects that may make 2011 as memorable a year in the history of social upheaval as 1968.

In today’s highly competitive media environment, “breaking news” of various sorts play out as media spectacle, including mega-events like wars and terrorist attacks; extreme weather disasters; or, in the spring of 2011, political insurrections and upheavals. These spectacles assume a narrative form and become focuses of attention during a specific temporal and historical period that may last only a few days, or come to dominate news and information for an extended period of time, as happened with the O.J. Simpson trial and the Clinton sex/impeachment scandal in the mid-1990s; the stolen election of 2000 in the Bush/Gore presidential campaign; or natural and other disasters that have significant destructive effects and political implications, such as Hurricane Katrina, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, or the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear catastrophe. Media spectacles can even become signature events of an entire epoch—as, arguably, were the 9/11 terrorist attacks that inaugurated a historical period that I describe as Terror War.2

During the spring of 2011, media spectacles of the North African Arab Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya emerged, followed by uprisings throughout the Middle East, producing transformative events that continue to have major consequences. Al-Jazeera, the global Arab cable broadcasting channel and Internet site located in Doha, referred to these events collectively as “the Arab Awakening,” a description that suggested that a new era of political struggle and insurrection was emerging in parts of the world that had been ruled for decades by oppressive dictatorships often supported by Western neocolonial and imperialist powers. Indeed, the overthrow of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in the spring of 2011 inspired insurrectionary movements in Libya,
Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria that are ongoing and taking dramatic and unpredictable forms. Further, the North African Arab Uprisings inspired the Occupy movements that erupted first in the United States, in September 2011, and then throughout the world.

The media spectacles of the Arab Uprisings thus generated tumultuous global spectacles of political struggle throughout the Middle East and other parts of the world, in which political upheaval and revolution were circulated, promoted, and took a multitude of forms. I argue that a significant dimension of globalization involves the circulation of images of popular political uprisings and insurrections. Of course, globalization continues to reproduce neoliberal market economics and intensifying global economic crisis, but globalization also has had a significant political and cultural dimension involving the circulation of discourses of human rights, international law, and democratic resistance—as well as of terrorism and other, darker phenomena. Globalization is thus highly contradictory and ambiguous, and it is increasingly a terrain of political and social struggle. This study looks at the North African Arab Uprisings through the prisms of their circulation as global media spectacles. After describing my concept of media spectacle, I draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the role of media spectacle in the Arab Uprisings and contemporary history. First, however, I want to establish a historical context for what I see as the emergence of media spectacle as a dominant form of culture, media, and now political struggle.

**The Rise and Triumph of Media Spectacle**

The emergence of media spectacle as a dominant form of “breaking news” that came to construct major news cycles arose as a central mode of news and information in the United States with the development of 24/7 cable and satellite news channels, which broadcast news and opinion twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. With the rise of global media based on cable and satellite television and the Internet, the spectacle has become global. Major examples include Gulf War 1, the first live TV war; the events of 9/11 and associated Al Qaeda terrorist attacks; the Iraq War of 2003; and, most recently, the Arab Awakening and Uprisings of 2011.
The infrastructure of media spectacle that generates its proliferation is global cable and satellite television, which emerged in the 1980s era of neoliberalism, deregulation, and increased media monopoly and competition between different media corporations and media technologies. This period marked the rise of cable news networks that broadcast news 24/7 and used media spectacle to capture viewers. In the 1990s, new media and politicized forms of media proliferated, including talk radio, Fox News, CNN, and other explosive, partisan news and information outlets. Highly politicized mainstream media is exemplified today in the United States in the battles between the Fox News and MSNBC cable news channels, as well as on the Internet, which has become a contested terrain used by the Left, the Right, and everyone in between.

The epoch of neoliberalism also exhibited the rise of “infotainment,” with the implosion of news and entertainment (seen, for example, in the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clinton sex scandals, celebrity scandals, and the like). Fierce competition for ratings and advertising led information and news to become more visual and engaging, bringing codes of entertainment into journalism. News accordingly became more narrative and tabloid, with scandals and ever-multiplying segments on fashion, health, entertainment, and items of personal interest. In this media environment, hard politics and international news are now declining on the major U.S. television networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC, while the cable news networks are dominated by media spectacle and often partisan political talk shows.

The 1990s was an era in which media spectacle accelerated in the fields of sports, entertainment, fashion, and consumer culture, which were always domains of the spectacle. In addition, the 1990s witnessed the spectacle of globalization and anti-globalization movements and the spectacle of global commodities such as McDonald’s, Nike, NBA basketball, the World Cup, and other global sports phenomena. This was also a period, aptly known as the blockbuster era, in which spectacle came to play an even greater role in Hollywood film.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, blogs, Wikipedia, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and other new media and social networking sites further extended the ubiquitous and omnipresent media matrix. Hence, the political economy and communications technology infrastructure of media spectacle have generated a proliferation of
cable and satellite television, followed by the dramatic eruption of new technologies such as the Internet and social networking media. The Internet made it possible for more people to voice opinions and to circulate news and information through ever-expanding new media and social networking sites, and Facebook, MySpace, iPhones and iPads, and other new technologies enabled everyone to become part of the spectacle (if you can afford and know how to use the technology). Hence, today, everyone from Hollywood and political celebrities, to Internet activists in Egypt and Tunisia, to terrorists in groups like Al Qaeda can create their own media spectacles or participate in the media spectacle of the day—as the Occupy movements dramatically demonstrated on a global scale in 2011.

Media spectacles traditionally have an aesthetic dimension and often are dramatic and bound up with ritual events and competitions, such as the Olympics, the World Cup, the Super Bowl, or the Oscars. They feature compelling images, montage, and stories; engage mass audiences; and generate discussion and debate throughout the media. Spectacles have a theatrical dimension and dramatize the key issues and conflicts of a given society; for example, the O.J. Simpson murder trial and Clinton sex scandals in the 1990s were spectacles in which key battles concerning gender, sexuality, race, celebrity, power, and the justice and political system played out. Spectacles also take a narrative form, becoming stories around which society is constructed at a given moment, and they can be contested and used for various social and political ends (as the 9/11 terror attacks were in the ensuing Terror War). Hence, media spectacle in the contemporary era encompasses both news and information and sports and entertainment. In the discussion that follows, I focus on how news media, social networking and new media, and popular forms of entertainment and culture helped circulate the struggles in the North African Arab Uprisings.

The length, duration, and import of media spectacles, of course, varies. Certain media spectacles like the O.J. Simpson trial may dominate news cycles until they are replaced by a new media spectacle, such as the Clinton sex scandals. The September 11, 2001, spectacles of terror helped generate an era of Terror War, with global terror networks fighting local, national, and global security and military networks, and it may be that this historical era is coming to an end as the 2011 Arab Upris-
ings, Occupy movements, and other popular struggles proliferate (of course, it is likely that both cycles of media spectacle will continue and overlap for some time).

Hence, new forms of political struggle and insurrection are emerging as a potent and fecund field of media spectacle. In this chapter, I explore the emergence of the new forms and strategies of struggle that erupted in 2011 in the North African Arab Uprisings. But, first, let me further explicate and illustrate my concept of media spectacle, and how it differs from that of Guy Debord, whose book *The Society of the Spectacle* had a major impact on post-1960s critical theory and shaped my own work in multiple ways.

**Guy Debord and *The Society of the Spectacle***

To clarify my concept of media spectacle, I will first indicate some differences between my use of the concept and French theorist Guy Debord’s concept of the “society of the spectacle,” which he developed with his comrades in the Situationist International, and which has had a major impact on a variety of contemporary theories of society and culture.  

Debord’s concept of the society of the spectacle, first developed in the 1960s, continues to circulate through the Internet and other academic and subcultural sites today. It describes a media and consumer society organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events. For Debord, spectacle “unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena,” including media events and programming; advertising and the display of commodities; and stores, malls, and other sites of consumption.

Hence, for Debord, spectacle constituted the overarching concept to describe the media and consumer society, including the packaging, promotion, and display of commodities and the production and effects of all media. Using the term “media spectacle,” I focus largely on various forms of productions that are technologically constructed and disseminated through the so-called mass media and now also through new media and social networking sites, ranging from radio and television to the Internet and the latest wireless gadgets and social networking. Every medium—from music to television, from news to advertising—features multitudinous forms of spectacle; in the realm of music, there is the...
classical music spectacle, the opera spectacle, the rock spectacle, and the hip hop spectacle. Spectacle forms evolve over time and multiply with new technological developments.

As we proceed into an era of ever-proliferating spectacle, multiple media are becoming more technologically dazzling and are playing expanding and intensifying roles in everyday life. Under the influence of a multimedia image culture, seductive spectacles fascinate the denizens of the media and consumer society and involve them in the semiotics of an ever-expanding world of entertainment, information, and consumption, which deeply influence thought and action. In Debord’s words: “When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs.”

Experience and everyday life are thus shaped and mediated for Debord by the spectacles of media culture and consumer society. For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a “permanent opium war” that stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life—recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice. Debord’s concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation and passivity, for in submissively consuming spectacles, one is estranged from actively producing one’s life. Capitalist society separates workers from the products of their labor, art from life, and consumption from human needs and self-directing activity, as individuals inertly observe the spectacles of social life from within the privacy of their homes. The Situationist project, by contrast, involved an overcoming of all forms of separation, in which individuals would directly produce their own life and modes of self-activity and collective practice, illustrated today by the Occupy movements.

The correlative to the spectacle for Debord is the spectator, the reactive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the cultivation of marketable difference. Debord’s concept of the spectacle therefore involves a distinction between passivity and activity, and between consumption and production, condemning...
lifeless consumption of spectacle as alienation from the human potential for creativity and imagination. The spectacular society spreads its wares mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture.

This structural shift to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously noncolonized sectors of social life and an extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life. Parallel to the Frankfurt School’s concept of a “totally administered” or “one-dimensional” society, Debord states that “the spectacle is the moment when the consumption has attained the total occupation of social life.”

Here, exploitation is raised to a psychological level; basic physical privation is augmented by “enriched privation” of pseudo-needs; alienation is generalized and made comfortable, and alienated consumption becomes “a duty supplementary to alienated production.”

Hence, Debord’s work is totalizing, with spectacle reproducing the entirety of capitalist media/consumer society, so that for Debord everything is part of the spectacle. By contrast, I analyze specific media spectacles and types of media spectacle, such as the 9/11 attacks and the acts of domestic terrorism and school shootings that I described in my 2008 book *Guys and Guns Amok*. Thus, while Debord presents a rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle, I engage specific examples of media spectacle and how they are produced, constructed, and circulated in the present era. In addition, I read the production, text, and effects of various media spectacles from a standpoint within contemporary U.S. and global society in order to illuminate and theorize their sociopolitical dynamics and culture, and more broadly, globalization and global culture. Debord, by contrast, analyzes a specific stage of capitalist society, that of the media and consumer society organized around spectacle. In addition, Debord deploys a French radical intellectual and neo-Marxian perspective, while I employ a multiperspectivist model, using Frankfurt School critical theory, British cultural studies, French postmodern theory, and many other theoretical constructs.

In sum, Debord’s concept of the spectacle is monolithic and overpowering. For Debord, the society of the spectacle generates a system of domination enforcing passivity, obedience, consumerism, and submission. To be sure, Debord opposes the passive spectator of spectacle and
valorizes the active creator of situations, and he offers strategies for forms of resistance to the spectacle that have been influential on subsequent politics and continue to be influential in an era of new media and social networking. Yet Debord’s conception of creating situations tends to valorize artistic and subcultural activity, while I suggest that media spectacle itself is a contested terrain that can be a force of opposition and resistance, as well as of domination and hegemony—and can be a site of contestation, reversal, and even revolution, as I argue in this chapter.

Further, I analyze the contradictions and reversals of the spectacle, whereas Debord tends to project a unitary and hegemonic notion of the society of the spectacle, although he and his comrades sketched out various models of opposition and struggle and in fact partially inspired the rather spectacular May 1968 events in France. For an example of the reversal of a media spectacle, or at least its contradictions and contestation, the Clinton sex scandal became a contested arena in which, surprisingly, President Clinton’s popularity rose as the scandal unfolded and the Republicans began pursuing impeachment. While the 2003 Iraq War was initially presented as a triumph for the Bush/Cheney administration and the Pentagon, it was contested and soon became an unpopular war. Barack Obama arguably won the Democratic Party primary because he was the only major Democratic candidate who opposed the Iraq War in the beginning, although Obama was also a master of media spectacle, which enabled him to win the presidency in 2008 and become a world-class celebrity. Yet in an intensely polarized U.S. society, the Obama spectacle has itself become sharply contested, as his opponents attempted by all possible means to undermine his presidency, and the 2012 presidential election saw a sharp contest between a pro- and anti-Obama spectacle, with Obama decisively beating Republican candidate Mitt Romney.

Finally, Debord’s analysis of the spectacle is denunciatory, developing a neo-Marxian attack on consumer capitalism. My concept, by contrast, is diagnostic, analyzing social problems, conflicts, and key events and transformations of the contemporary era. Debord’s notion of the society of the spectacle theorizes the emergence in the post–World War II era of the media and consumer society and continues to be relevant in analyzing social formations and politics. Both his social critique and models of radical politics remain of utmost importance for critical social
theory and radical politics today. Yet the emergence of new media, new forms of global capitalism, and new models of political struggle call for updating Debord’s concepts in a transformed socioeconomic, political, and cultural context. These new forms of global struggle are illustrated in the North African Arab Uprisings and the Occupy movements, the former of which I engage in this study.

The North African Arab Uprisings

During the Spring 2011 North African Arab Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, political insurgencies and hoped-for revolutions unfolded as media spectacles that circulated images and discourses of revolt, freedom, and democracy via global media. These insurrections—which erupted in late January 2011 and continued to shake the world and reconstitute the political landscape of North Africa and the Middle East throughout 2011 and into the foreseeable future—may be seen in retrospect as inaugurating a new epoch of history, in which political uprisings and insurrections radicalize entire regions of the world and drive out corrupt and entrenched dictatorships.

To begin, however, I should offer some caveats. Although Al-Jazeera, CNN, and most U.S. media networks at first repeatedly used the term “revolution” to describe the events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, we do not know if a thorough transformation of these societies will take place or not. Thus, I use the more modest term “uprisings” to describe the important media spectacles and political insurrections of the Arab Spring, which may yet be looked back on as world-historical and transformative events.19

It is, to be sure, “revolutionary” to overthrow military regimes and corrupt dictators who have been oppressing their people for decades. It is “revolutionary” to put aside a government and political system and to construct another, freer and more democratic, one. It is tremendous that self-organizing people can produce a democratic upheaval that may fundamentally alter their political fate and future. The events of the Arab Spring are clearly astonishing examples of people’s power, of the masses becoming a force in history who throw off decades of oppression and fundamentally alter the forces of sovereignty in specific societies. However, it was initially unclear if the North African Uprisings would
produce a revolution proper. First, it was not certain what form the military government in Egypt, for example, would take in the immediate future, and it remains uncertain what forms of government will emerge in Egypt after the election of a Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, in June 2012, or what kind of constitution and forms of government the Egyptian upheaval will produce after demonstrations against Morsi’s attempt to impose an Islamic constitution and assembly on Egypt, struggles still ongoing as I write in early 2013. Hence, it would be premature to pronounce the “‘eighteen days that shook the world in Egypt’ a ‘revolution’ at this time—nor can we predict the form that the insurrections will ultimately take in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and other Middle Eastern states that were challenged by their people in the Arab Spring that blossomed into a year of upheaval in 2011, and have since taken a turbulent course.

To be sure, it is remarkable that the Egyptians threw out the corrupt leaders and functionaries of the past three decades, but if the Morsi government imposes an Islamic regime on the Egyptian people, or if there is a military coup, it would be utterly inappropriate to use the word “revolution.” This is why I suggest using the terms “uprising” and “insurrection” to describe the upheavals in the Middle East and elsewhere in the contemporary moment.

In addition, I advocate a multicausal analysis, arguing that media spectacles such as presidential elections, wars, and political uprisings and upheaval have multiple causes and are caught up in a complex matrix of events. For instance, there was not just one cause that generated the Bush/Cheney intervention in Iraq in 2003. While the official stated reason for the United States’s entry into war in Iraq—to eliminate Saddam Hussein’s “weapons of mass destruction”—was obviously bogus, there were multiple hidden agendas that led the United States to invade and occupy Iraq. These included gaining control of Iraqi oil and establishing bases in the Middle East for future interventions; the tremendous amount of money made by war contractors often closely related to the Bush/Cheney gang; and a wealth of geopolitical factors.

Arguably, the Bush/Cheney Iraq intervention was organized as a media spectacle intended to present U.S. military power as dominant in the world and to establish new U.S. military bases in the Middle East near the world’s largest oil supplies. A successful intervention into Iraq.
would also help with the re-election of the Bush/Cheney gang. The Iraq (mis)adventure embodied the fantasies of George W. Bush and a cabal of neoconservative ideologues who envisaged a New American Century and the emergence of Western-style “democracies” throughout the region. Bush imagined that he was battling the forces of “evil” and could succeed in destroying a force of evil that his father had failed to eliminate. Thus, while the official justification of seizing Saddam Hussein’s “weapons of mass destruction” was clearly a fake excuse, it would also be a mistake to see the Iraq invasion simply as a grab for oil, or the result of any other single primary cause.

Major events like the Bush/Cheney administration’s Iraq intervention and the North African Arab Uprisings are thus overdetermined, and have multiple causes. The dynamics in each specific case are dissimilar, although there may be common goals, aspirations, and tactics of struggle. Hence, I do not want to argue that media spectacle is the primary cause of current events and world history today, but instead to suggest that it is a form in which political insurrections and struggles are represented and circulated that can become causal factors in an overdetermined matrix of events. For instance, the Tunisian Uprising could have helped inspire an Egyptian Uprising, which apparently helped inspire uprisings in Libya and throughout the Middle East. In all cases of the Arab Uprisings, masses of people who had long been oppressed suddenly rose up and demanded radical change and democratic freedoms.

The North African Uprisings thus constituted a break and rupture with the totalitarian governments that previously ruled the region, and in turn inspired uprisings and a cycle of struggles throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Media spectacle became the form of the uprisings that were circulated via Al-Jazeera and other television networks, new media like Facebook and YouTube, and various social networking groups. In each case, there were unprecedentedly large demonstrations in oppressive societies that had not allowed freedom of speech and assembly, and state authoritarian governments fought back against the demonstrators, often killing many who then became martyrs. In turn, demonstrations often erupted at the martyrs’ funerals and continued to intensify, with radical demands for the dictators and their regimes to go and for power to be given to the people. In many cases, participants in the struggles took their own videos of state violence against the protesters, which
were circulated via Twitter, YouTube, and cell phone networks on the Internet, and in some cases through global cable TV networks. The people were participating in the creation of the spectacles of the Arab Awakening and Uprising, and not only because their bodies were part of the democratic masses. Individuals within the masses also found their own voices and helped construct the spectacle through their own D.I.Y. (i.e., do-it-yourself) media artifacts uploaded to the Internet, circulated via social networking, and in some cases disseminated through global television networks like Al-Jazeera.

Looked at globally and historically, the recent North African Arab Uprisings can be read as a set of interconnected spectacles with many parts, as were the anti-Communist uprisings in 1989 that led to the collapse of the Berlin Wall and Soviet Empire, and then to the fall of the Soviet Union itself, world-historical events that provide an anticipatory parallel to the media spectacles in the Middle East. In the 1980s, demonstrations by the Solidarity movement in Poland were visible in Hungary via television and other media, helping to inspire demonstrations in that country that in turn were visible in other Eastern bloc countries, such as East Germany (DDR) and Czechoslovakia. The powerful images of people uprising against the Communist regimes, demanding freedom and a new society, produced a chain of movements, insurrections, and overthrowing of communist regimes, much like the Arab Uprisings, as well as the collapse of bureaucratic state Communism. In this complex historical matrix, the then-dominant broadcasting media of television circulated images and forms of struggle that were seen throughout the Soviet bloc countries, helping to produce multiple uprisings and the delegitimation of autocratic Communist regimes, leading to the collapse of Soviet Empire in eastern Europe, and culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989. These dramatic events of 1989 eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet regime in the U.S.S.R, driving some people to see 1989 as the beginning a new epoch in world history.

Images of the spectacle of uprisings against repressive state Communist governments and social systems resonated with citizens of other oppressed countries in the Soviet bloc, and these resonant and viral images spread through the global broadcasting and news networks and inspired people in neighboring Soviet bloc countries, helping to moti-
vate people to hit the streets and demonstrate for change themselves. Hence, throughout the Eastern bloc state communist nations, there were uprisings and struggles, and governments resigning or being overthrown. The democratic revolutions thus inspired a whole cycle of struggle in 1989—just as we are now seeing in the Middle East and North African Arab Uprisings.

Although such events are complex and overdetermined, and media spectacle alone is but one factor in the complex matrix of history, it is certainly a significant and increasingly important one as media spectacles proliferate globally through new media and social networking. Indeed, broadcasting and new media have become ubiquitous throughout the Middle East, as they have become part of a new global media ecology. In the following sections, I discuss the role of Al-Jazeera, new media and social networking, and media spectacle in the Arab Awakening and Uprisings of 2011, but I am also concerned with providing a contextual and multicausal analysis of these events, beginning with Tunisia and then turning to Egypt. While my argument is that media spectacle is the form in which the Arab Awakening and Uprising circulated throughout North Africa and the Middle East, media spectacle itself is not the cause of the cascading insurrections, and each country needs to be addressed separately in terms of its own history, society, culture, and political regimes, which I do below.

**Sparks in Tunisia**

The rapid cycle of North African Arab Uprisings began when a twenty-six-year-old Tunisian man named Mohamed Bouazizi, who could not find work and was reduced to selling produce from a cart in the street, set himself on fire in front of the local governor’s office on December 17, 2010, in Bouzid, an impoverished agricultural town. His act helped spark uprisings in Tunisia and then in Egypt and Libya. Bouazizi’s family and friends recount that he took these desperate measures because he had become unbearably angry after being repeatedly mistreated by the police, who threatened to close down his cart if he did not pay them bribes.

On February 19, 2011, 60 Minutes broadcast an episode titled “The Spark” that described how, following the self-immolation protest, activists in Tunisia began circulating images of Bouazizi. They made him
into a martyr, organizing marches commemorating him and protesting the oppressive Tunisian regime. The protests escalated as Tunisian forces shot at protestors, leading to bigger demonstrations that were further energized on January 24, 2011, when dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power for twenty-three years, fled the country.\footnote{27}

I might note that the man who set himself on fire was emulating Buddhist monks in Vietnam in the 1960s, whose widely broadcast and discussed self-immolations helped generate a worldwide antiwar movement. The global nature of spectacle was also highlighted in the \textit{60 Minutes} episode, in which Tunisian Internet activists were interviewed. These activists had helped mobilize the insurgency, and they were connected to Egyptian Internet activists who would use similar tactics in Egypt, suggesting the rise of a Youth International of Internet activists.\footnote{28}

While there were claims that the Tunisian Uprising was the “first WikiLeaks revolution” because oppressive features of the Tunisian regime were documented by WikiLeaks, which presented notes of American diplomats discussing the corruption of President Ben Ali and his family, it is also believed that people already knew that their regime was oppressive and corrupt.\footnote{29} Further, Al-Jazeera and other Arab networks covered the Tunisian Uprising and circulated protests and critiques of the Ben Ali regime.

Hence, I am not arguing that media spectacle was the key causal force of the Tunisian Uprising; obviously, there were many factors that alienated the Tunisians and led them to take to the streets, including the autocratic and corrupt nature of the regime. These factors included Tunisia’s economic situation, with declining jobs and job possibilities, rising food prices, and worker unrest, all of which contributed to the Tunisian upheaval that drove out Ben Ali, his family, and some of the regime’s corrupt associates.

Ben Ali came into power on November 7, 1987, after attending physicians to the former president, Habib Bourguiba, declared that Bourguiba was medically incapacitated and unable to fulfill the duties of the presidency. Ben Ali, previously prime minister, achieved power through a “soft coup d’etat” and preserved Tunisia’s republican tradition, keeping power by winning two elections. The Ben Ali regime pursued neoliberal economic policies, dismantling a heavily statist economy and winning praise from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World

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Bank. While the country’s gross national product grew in recent years, unemployment skyrocketed and educated youth were having trouble finding jobs. At the same time, Ben Ali’s family and regime became more and more blatantly corrupt, and Ben Ali became increasingly authoritarian, alienating vast sectors of the society.

The Tunisian Uprising against the Ben Ali regime exhibited the rise of the masses against a totalitarian dictatorship in a popular struggle with no apparent leaders, no dominant parties, and no discernible hierarchy, with individuals from diverse classes, ages, religion, and ways of life fusing together into a collective mass whose power frightened the corrupt dictator and caused him to flee, after the military made it clear that they were not going to fire on the masses of protestors. Demonstrators included older people, professional men and women, students, workers, and the unemployed. No one predicted this momentous insurrection, and so far, to my knowledge, few have adequately described its genealogy and prehistory.

Indeed, the Tunisian Uprising had multiple origins and forces who participated in the struggles, from workers to students, intellectuals, and women. As Kevin Anderson notes:

Although not widely reported at the time, the mass strikes of 2008 in Gafsa were one indicator of the underlying social tensions in Tunisia. This phosphate-mining region, long a center of labor unrest, has in recent decades been wracked by mass unemployment due to mechanization. In January 2008, the Gafsa phosphate miners rose up after a rare instance of taking on new hires at the mines showed that those hired were the beneficiaries of corruption and nepotism. The revolt lasted six months, after which several of its leaders were imprisoned. Gafsa strikers were not supported by the UGTT [General Union of Tunisian Works], then still tied closely to the state. The workers did gain the support of dissident bloggers and Facebook users, however, who launched a campaign on behalf of those imprisoned.

Robin Morgan describes how, in Tunisia’s relatively secular and progressive society, women had earlier gained rights to contraception, divorce, and relative equality. In the Tunisian Uprising, women sought more democratic power and rose up against continued inequality. In Tunisia’s “Jasmine revolution,” a blogger named Lina Ben Mhenni, known
to the world simply as “tunisian girl,” was one of the first to alert the world to the Tunisian Uprising, and she called for women to join in the demonstrations. Hence, in Robin Morgan’s words: “Women flocked to rallies—wearing veils, jeans, and miniskirts—young girls, grandmothers, female judges in their court robes. They ousted a despot and inspired a region.” In addition, as feminist scholar Nadia Marzouki notes:

At all the major demonstrations leading to Ben Ali’s flight from the country, men and women marched side by side, holding hands and chanting together in the name of civil rights, not Islam. The national anthem, not “Allahu akbar,” was the dominant rallying cry, and the women were both veiled and unveiled. The tone of the protests was rather one of reappropriating patriotic language and symbols: Women and men lay in the streets to spell “freedom” or “stop the murders” with their bodies and worked together to tear down and burn the gigantic, Stalin-style portraits of Ben Ali on storefronts and street corners.

Demonstrations intensified, and when the General Union of Tunisian Works (UGTT) broke away from the ruling apparatus, joined the demonstrators, participated in a blockade against the Interior Ministry, and supported a general strike, the military saw that the regime could not be defended. It refused to fire on demonstrators and supported Ben Ali’s ouster. Al-Jazeera also reported over the weekend of January 8–9 that two thousand members of the police, who had been on the front line of repressing demonstrations, joined the protestors. While Ben Ali desperately announced that he would not run for another term on January 13, 2011, and pledged to improve the economy and allow freedom of the press, while also declaring a state of emergency, protesters responded with a massive demonstration, demanding that he resign. On January 14, he fled the country.

On Saturday, January 15, it was announced that Ben Ali was seeking asylum in Saudi Arabia, and that Tunisian prime minister Mohamed Ghannouchi had declared temporary rule and promised elections for the fall, leading exultant Tunisians to explode with joy while people throughout the Middle East looked on with wonder. Tunisians were suspicious of the new caretaker government, which was dominated by members of Ben Ali’s party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP).
Eventually, all members of the party were eliminated from the new coalition government, which included Tunisian blogger Slim Amamou (a.k.a. Slim404), who had helped organize the Tunisian Uprising and was made Minister of Youth and Sport in the postrevolutionary government.

Members of underground music scenes and subcultures had also contributed to the uprising, including Skander Besbes (a.k.a. Skhder), described as a “luminary of Tunisia’s electro and dance scene, [who] in clubs and rave nights used the explosive sound system to present attacks on the government and prepare youth for the uprising.” Andy Morgan notes that electronic music was relatively safe as a protest form in Tunisia because it was instrumental, and “metal and rock were partially protected by English lyrics which the police didn’t understand.” Yet, Morgan explains:

It took a rapper to galvanise Tunisia’s youth, whose frustration had been fuelled by years of government corruption, nepotism, ineptitude and general state-imposed joylessness. Until a few months ago, Hamada Ben Amor, aka El Général, was just a 21-year-old wannabe MC in a Stussy hoodie, leather jacket and baseball cap. He lived with his parents and elder brother in a modest flat in a drab seaside town south of Tunis called Sfax, where his mother runs a bookshop and his father works in the local hospital. El Général didn’t even register on the radar of Tunisian rap’s premier league which was dominated by artists such as Balti, Lak3y, Armada Bizera or Psyco M. It was a community riven by the usual jealous spats and dwarfed by the more prolific rap scenes of Morocco and France.

Morgan recounts that on November 7, 2010, El Général “uploaded a piece of raw fury called ‘Rais Le Bled’ (President, Your Country) on to Facebook. The lyrics contained a resounding political attack”:

My president, your country is dead
People eat garbage
Look at what is happening
Misery everywhere
Nowhere to sleep
I’m speaking for the people who suffer
Ground under feet.
Morgan describes how “within hours, the song had lit up the bleak and fearful horizon like an incendiary bomb. Before being banned, it was picked up by local TV station Tunivision and al-Jazeera. El Général’s MySpace [account] was closed down, his mobile cut off. But it was too late. The shock waves were felt across the country and then throughout the Arab world. That was the power of protesting in Arabic, albeit a locally spiced dialect of Arabic. El Général’s bold invective broke frontiers and went viral, from Casablanca to Cairo and beyond.”

This example points to the presence of an Arab public sphere that operates across diverse media and borders, in which music, poetry, art, and other cultural forms function to circulate forms of cultural resistance that came together in the Arab Uprising. While U.S. media provided very little coverage of the Tunisian Uprising, Al-Jazeera closely covered the events, as it had during the demonstrations in Iran in 2009, and it would continue to cover and circulate the Arab Awakening and Uprisings. The synergy of global media television coverage with Internet, and social networking documentation and promotion, the fusion of artists and cultural critics with the movement, and the coming together of multiple organizations and social strata helped circulate the Tunisian Uprising to Egypt and then the Egyptian Uprising to the entire Middle East and beyond.

Upheaval in Egypt

Egypt has been one of the great historical civilizations and traditional major political and cultural influences in the Middle East, but suffered for more than thirty years under the corrupt and dictatorial rule of Hosni Mubarak, who ascended to the presidency in 1981 after the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat. While Mubarak ostensibly introduced a system of “democratic” elections, they were farces, with Mubarak winning 99.99 percent of the vote in the elections of 1987, 1993, 1999, and 2005. While Mubarak himself was old and sick, he and his cronies were pushing for his son Gamal to succeed him, setting up a family dynasty. The Mubarak regime was one of the most corrupt and repressive in the region, increasingly hated by its people and thus rife for an upheaval.
A series of anticipatory events, circulated via the Middle Eastern and global media, inspired the tumultuous and significant 2011 insurrection against the Mubarak regime. These events included a revolt of textile workers, who demonstrated against Mubarak in 2008 in the city of El Mahalla el Kubra; demonstrators stomped on Mubarak’s picture, police shot into the crowd, killing two, and the event and two murdered workers were made martyrs on YouTube and Facebook. As Joel Benin has argued, Egypt’s workers had been steadily organizing independent trade unions outside of the state union movement dominated by the Mubarak government, had successfully been making economic and political demands, and were an important part of the movement that overthrew Mubarak.

While Mubarak had ruled Egypt with an iron hand since assuming power, there were many democratic forces mobilized against him from all sectors of society. In a series of short essays from 2005 up to the uprisings, Egyptian writer Alaa Al Aswany documented numerous critiques, protests, and forces of opposition emerging in Egypt during the previous decade. Actors in these events included intellectuals, politicians, students, and many others throughout Egyptian society. Concerning the important role of women, Robin Morgan notes that despite decades of dictatorship, “a long-established feminist movement has survived there. Women had been key to the 1919 revolution against the British, but after independence were ignored by the ruling Wafd Party.” Documenting specific events that helped spark the uprising, Shahin and Juan Cole note that:

In Egypt, the passionate video blog or “vlog” of Asmaa Mahfouz that called on Egyptians to turn out massively on January 25th in Tahrir Square went viral, playing a significant role in the success of that event. Mahfouz appealed to Egyptians to honor four young men who, following the example of Mohammed Bouazizi (in an act which sparked the Tunisian uprisings), set themselves afire to protest the Mubarak regime.

Although the secret police had already dismissed them as “psychopaths,” she insisted otherwise, demanding a country where people could live in dignity, not “like animals.” According to estimates, at least 20% of the crowds that thronged Tahrir Square that first week were made up
of women, who also turned out in large numbers for protests in the Medi-
terranean port of Alexandria. Leil-Zahra Mortada’s celebrated Facebook
album of women’s participation in the Egyptian revolution gives a sense
of just how varied and powerful that turnout was.13

Hence, the Egyptian Uprising can be read as a fusing of workers,
students, women, and individuals from a diversity of popular move-
ments.44 A PBS Frontline Report titled “Revolution in Cairo” (February 22,
2011) described how a group of young students and professionals had
for the past three years been organizing an April 6 Youth Movement,
commemorating a 2008 labor demonstration, developing a website and
Facebook page documenting the crimes of the Mubarak regime, and
organizing protests.45

After the murder by Mubarak thugs of Khalid Said, a young Egyptian
who was beaten to death by police in June 2010, Google executive Wael
Ghonim helped to establish a Facebook page called “We are all Khalid
Said” to commemorate the martyr. The Facebook page eventually had
more than 1,500,000 followers and was used by activists to educate
Egyptians and others about the horrors of the Mubarak regime and to
develop democracy movements. As Linda Herrera describes it in “Egypt’s
Revolution 2.0: The Facebook Factor,”

The events leading to Khaled’s killing originated when he supposedly
posted a video of two police officers allegedly dividing the spoils of a drug
bust. This manner of citizen journalism has become commonplace and
youth are getting more emboldened to expose the festering corruption of
a police force that acts with impunity. On June 6, 2010, as Khaled Said
was sitting in an internet café in Alexandria, two police officers entered
and asked him for his I.D. He refused to produce it and they proceeded
to drag him away and allegedly sadistically beat him to his death as he
pleaded for his life in the view of witnesses. The officers claimed that
Khaled died of suffocation after swallowing a packet of drugs. His family
released a photograph to an activist of the broken, bloodied, and dis-
figured face from Khaled’s corpse. This photo, and a portrait of the
gentle soft skinned face of the living Khaled, went viral. The power of
photographic evidence combined with eyewitness accounts and popular
knowledge of police brutality left no doubt in anyone’s mind that he was
senselessly and brutally murdered by police officers, the very people who are supposed to act in the interest of public safety.  

Ahmed Maher, Ghonim, and other Egyptian Internet activists used the Khalid Said page and other Internet tools to organize a demonstration in Tahrir Square titled “January 25: Revolution against Torture, Corruption, Unemployment and Injustice,” also billed as a “Day of Rage.” Thousands appeared at the demonstration, which became focused on overthrowing the Mubarak regime, and for the next eighteen days a movement centered in Tahrir Square grew that would lead to the end of Mubarak’s rule.

There were, therefore, arguably multiple genealogies and anticipations of the Egyptian Uprising. Robin Morgan describes the role of women in Tahrir Square, where, according to Amal Abdel Hady of the New Women Foundation, “all generations and social classes were represented.” While Hady noticed that much more media attention was focused on men rather than women, Morgan notes that on January 18, 2011, a woman “whom Egyptians now call ‘Leader of the revolution’ . . . uploaded a short video to YouTube and Facebook in which she announced, ‘Whoever says women shouldn’t go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25.’ The video went viral. The planned one-day demonstration became a popular phenomenon.”

In addition, there had been heavy media coverage of the Iran demonstrations and calls for regime change after an allegedly stolen election in 2009. Indeed, for years Al-Jazeera has been promoting democracy in the Middle East, and has regularly produced critiques of corrupt regimes, presented demonstrations and calls for change, and debated Middle East politics. Commentators noted that Al-Jazeera “has emerged as a full-fledged political actor because it reflects and articulates popular sentiment. It has become the new Nasser. The leader of the Arab world is a television network.” In addition to Al-Jazeera, an oppositional Internet culture, as noted, had been steadily developing in Tunisia and Egypt, including connections between youth in these countries, who also had external help from hacker groups abroad: “In Operation Egypt and Operation Tunisia, Anonymous and other groups coordinated to restore citizens’ access to websites blocked by the gov-
ernment. The efforts extended beyond the Internet, with faxes used to communicate vital information as a means of last resort. (In classic ‘lulzy’ style. Cyberactivists also caused havoc by ordering enormous quantities of pizza delivered to Egyptian and Tunisian embassies.)

Egypt had suffered thirty years of a corrupt dictatorship, the Mubarak thug regime, which had long oppressed the people and made them ripe for revolt (as the Soviet regime had in the 1980s). Likewise, the economic situation was bad in Egypt, especially for educated young people who could not get good jobs. Yet it appears that Internet activists and young people began the revolt in Egypt and continued to support it throughout the struggle. As was well publicized, former Google manager Wael Ghonim admits that after the Tunisian uprising and regime change, he and other young people used Facebook and Twitter to organize demonstrations in four different Cairo squares, unleashing massive protests and coining the phrase “Revolution 2.0.”

I myself received an email from a young scholar named Bahaa Gamil Ghobrial, whom I had met at a conference in the United States in December 2010, documenting the role of new media and social networking:

The demonstration started on Jan 25th and the call for it was done mainly through Facebook. Because of the government’s heavy control over all the traditional media, the Internet is the only available option for all opposition parties and movements.

The youth who called for the first demonstration on Jan 25th belong to upper middle class in Egypt and most of them, if not all, have Internet access. So, I agree with the argument that information technology and social networks, such as Facebook contributed greatly to the uprising—propelling it forward and enabling Egyptians to self-organize. Facebook is the second most visited website in Egypt (around 5 million Facebook users) and it is followed by YouTube (the third most visited website). Twitter is ranked 21 among the most visited websites in Egypt, but I believe that it will be soon in the top fifteen most visited websites after the uprising in Egypt. Kindly find attached two images regarding the increase of tweets after Jan 25th.

Also, last Wednesday the new prime minister decided to unblock the Internet after 5 days of shutting it down; so we started to use it to mobilize citizens and encourage them to participate in the demonstrations. As you
might know, sometimes these demonstrations are not safe; so, as soon as we reach Tahrir Square, we take photos of the demonstration and upload them to our Facebook profiles to tell our friends that we are participating and encourage them to come over.

In addition, we currently have two teams in Egypt, anti-Mubarak and pro-Mubarak; so, we are using new media tools, such as Facebook and YouTube, to show pro-Mubarak people what the regime did to protesters. Many of the pro-Mubarak people were convinced that Mubarak should step down after watching these videos.

The survey that I conducted for my thesis was about the impact of new media on political communication in Egypt with a special focus on the Egyptian Presidential election in 2011.54

There is no question that social networking and new media contributed to the Egyptian Uprising, but to the issue of whether the events can be interpreted as a “Twitter revolution,” I would argue that new media and social networking are only part of the story. I am against technological determinism and exaggerating the causal force of new media, and I am hesitant at this point to use the term “revolution.” To be sure, Facebook pages commemorated martyrs who had been killed by police in the current and previous demonstrations and, according to my Egyptian colleague cited above, YouTube and Facebook communiqués concerning repression of Egyptians helped turn pro-Mubarak demonstrators into anti-Mubarak ones, or ones who realized his regime was finished.

Yet it is perhaps the global cable networks that broadcast “revolution” live, as events were unfolding 24/7 on Al-Jazeera and various Arab networks, as well as on CNN and BBC. The often-saturated coverage on global TV networks, and especially on Al-Jazeera, made the struggle in Egypt a world-historical event of global interest, which in turn helped to incite people to pour into the street to take part in the momentous insurrection, as live TV footage and interviews were circulated through global media. While there have not yet appeared scholarly investigations of the role of Al-Jazeera and other television networks in inspiring and mobilizing the North African Arab Uprisings, it is likely that the images of demonstrations, uprisings, and the overthrow of regimes in Tunisia and then Egypt inspired protestors throughout the world.55

Indeed, Al-Jazeera has been covering and circulating protests and
critiques of the various Middle East regimes since its origins in the mid-1990s. During the Bush/Cheney administration, Al-Jazeera was vilified as “anti-American,” and its broadcasting facilities in Afghanistan were bombed (see Kellner 2005). Yet in subsequent years, both its Arabic and English networks have been widely praised as providing first-rate reporting and a diversity of opinion. If the Gulf War was the “moment of CNN,” when that network’s images from Iraq and the Gulf region were broadcast throughout the world, the North African Arab Uprisings were “the moment of Al-Jazeera.” Hits to the network’s web-television site received a record number of viewers, and Al-Jazeera English was played on various PBS and other news channels and cable systems throughout the world. It was also available on the Internet, making it an indispensable source of news and information and a material force in promoting and encouraging the democratic uprisings through positive representations of the demonstrators and negative ones of the repressive regimes being demonstrated against. In fact, Hillary Clinton conceded during a question-and-answer session before the U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities Committee on Information War that “Al-Jazeera has been the leader in that [it is] literally changing people’s minds and attitudes. And like it or hate it, it is really effective.”

Hence, perhaps television was as influential as the Internet in inciting and intensifying the Egyptian Uprising spectacle, since live events on TV are so dramatic and engrossing (although to some extent the distinction between television and Internet collapses, since Al-Jazeera, BBC, CNN, and other major global television networks are also accessible on the Internet). Television presents a “you-are-there” spectacle of history in the making, as major events are covered 24/7 by cable networks, and now the Internet. Whenever there is a significant media spectacle, global media pour in to the spot, whether it is New York after 9/11, Iraq during the 2003 Bush/Cheney War against Iraq, the Gulf coast during and after Hurricane Katrina, Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, or now Egypt after the uprisings (although with the eruption of the Libyan Uprising in late February 2011, global media quickly refocused its attention on the new spectacle, and in 2012 focused on the Syrian Uprising).

The global media often take the positions of the opposition movements, or of victims of extreme weather events or terrorist attacks, because they come to empathize with the people whom they are cover-
ing. The spectacles are punctuated by “breaking news,” and major events like the 9/11 terror attacks, the Gulf War, and now the North African Arab Uprisings gain massive, rapt audiences. The “big stories” are made compelling and involving, and the proliferating feed of images, action scenes, opinions from the street, “expert analyses,” and, in the case under investigation, masses of people risking their lives for their country, present exciting live television at its best. Big stories like that of the North African Arab Uprisings grip entire regions and become the major spectacles of their era.

While people were killed during the Egyptian demonstrations, the army appeared neutral and people kept pouring into the streets and squares of Cairo and other Egyptian cities, getting increasingly radicalized and becoming the stars of a global media spectacle that was energizing oppositional consciousness throughout the Middle East and indeed the world. On the third day of the protests, the Muslim Brotherhood leadership told its members to support the demonstrations, as young members of the group already had. The Brothers began providing security for the demonstrators and bringing in food and medical supplies.59

Not only were women very involved in participating in the Egyptian Uprising, but they were also instrumental “in much of the nitty-gritty organisation that turned Tahrir Square from a moment into a movement. Women were involved in arranging food deliveries, blankets, the stage and medical help.”60 Robin Morgan points out that “soon, unsung protest coordinator Amal Sharaf—a 36-year-old English teacher, single mother and member of the the organizers April 6 Youth Movement—was spending days and nights in the movement’s tiny office, smoking furiously and overseeing a crew of men. Google employee Wael Ghonim, who privately administered one of the Facebook pages that were the movement’s virtual headquarters, would later become an icon—but after he was arrested, young Nadine Wahab, an Egyptian American expert on new media advocacy, took over, strengthening the online presence.”61

In addition, youth cultures and artists were involved in the movement and massive protests. As in Tunisia, the rap music community became very involved, and Andy Morgan noted that

Karim Adel Eissa, aka A-Rush from Cairo rappers Arabian Knightz, stayed up late into the night of Thursday 27 January recording new lyrics for the
tune “Rebel,” which he was determined to release on Facebook and Media-Fire. “Egypt is rising up against the birds of darkness,” spat the lyrics. “It was a direct call for revolution,” Karim says. “Before, we’d only used metaphors to talk about the corrupt system. But once people were out on the streets, we were just like, ‘Screw it.’ If we’re going down, we’re going down.”

He and his crew just about managed to upload the new version of the song before Karim was called away to help with the vigilante security detail who were down in the streets keeping his neighbourhood free of looters and government thugs.62

Further, Andy Morgan points out that a diversity of musicians, from old to young, performed daily for crowds and invigorated the participants with their music, some of which was composed especially for the uprising:

After the uprising of 25 January, Cairo’s Tahrir Square resounded to the traditional Egyptian frame drum or daf, which pounded out trance-like beats over which the crowd laid slogans full of poetic power and joyful hilarity. As the Egyptian people rediscovered what it felt like to be a nation, united and indivisible, they reverted to the raw power of their most basic musical instincts to celebrate their mass release from fear—traditional drumming and chanting and patriotic songs from the glory days of yore when Egypt trounced the forces of imperialism in 1956 or took Israel by surprise in 1973.63

In the following days, ever-greater numbers of people congregated in Tahrir Square, renamed “Liberation Square,” in Cairo, and global media poured in to make the spectacle global. On the ninth day, things turned nasty, with Mubarak sympathizers and thugs going after demonstrators and the global media themselves. Organized thugs were bused in and attacked protestors with knives, machetes, and other weapons; horse and camel riders also assaulted the protestors. Foreign media personnel were threatened and hit by thugs in front of cameras, which caught the episode; other global media workers were arrested and in some cases blindfolded and held overnight, assuring that foreign media would remain critical of the Mubarak regime and sympathetic to the demonstrators.

There were pitched fights all day February 2 between protestors and Mubarak thugs: hundreds of Molotov cocktails were thrown; both groups...
picked rocks from the streets to throw at opponents; buildings were set on fire; and some reporters were attacked and detained by Mubarak thugs and then released, making February 2 and 3 days of intense drama and spectacle, broadcast live over global media networks like CNN, BBC, and Al-Jazeera.

Events continued to be intensely dramatic on day ten, as hundreds of thousands of anti-Mubarak demonstrators gathered in Tahrir Square, which had emerged as ground zero for the insurgency. Crowds also appeared at other sites throughout Egypt, with demonstrators calling for a “day of departure.” Over the following days, the occupation of Tahrir Square continued to expand, demonstrations unfolded throughout the country, the army remained neutral, and the Mubarak regime began to make concessions. Mubarak appeared on television, claiming he would not run for president again, and then nominated Chief of Intelligence Omar Suleimen as vice president, with whom he would share power during the buildup to promised elections in September.

Mubarak’s concessions were perceived as too little, too late, and the demonstrations continued unabated, calling for Mubarak to surrender the presidency. On days fourteen and fifteen, workers joined in with strikes throughout the country, and on day seventeen, it was rumored that Mubarak would step down, with the military organizing a new government (a claim reiterated by CIA chief Leon Panetta). Tremendous anticipation grew as it was announced that Mubarak was coming to speak on television. In his long, rambling speech, however, he appeared not to yield and the crowds roared their disapproval.

As commentators unpacked Mubarak’s ambiguous speech, it became apparent that he said he was transferring power to Vice President Omar Suleimen, who came on after Mubarak and told the crowd to go home. The people in Freedom Square, however, went wild, shouting “Leave, Leave, Leave!” and waving their shoes at the cameras, a gesture of utter contempt in the Arab world. The Western press described Mubarak’s stunt as a “right feint,” and an Egyptian American commentator on Al-Jazeera summed it up: “We was Punked!” In fact, the arrogant Mubarak was obviously unaware of the depth of hatred of his people and thought he could play verbal games with them, holding onto power.

Mubarak’s speech prompted President Barack Obama to respond that “the Egyptian people have been told that there was a transition of
authority, but it is not yet clear that this transition is immediate, meaningful or sufficient,” and for the first time Obama made it clear to Egyptian officials that Mubarak had to go. According to an anonymous American source, the Obama administration had been “trying to walk a fine line between retaining support for Mubarak while trying to infuse common sense into the equation. By the end of the day, it was clear the situation was no longer tenable.”

On February 12, Mubarak left Cairo for his resort home in Egypt, and reports said that the protest in Cairo’s Tahrir Square had spilled out into surrounding streets following Friday prayers. Protesters were now also massed outside Egypt’s state television headquarters and the presidential palace in the Heliopolis district of the Egyptian capital and, significantly, the army turned the cannons on their tanks away from the people. Then, Vice President Suleiman came on Egyptian state television to say that Mubarak had dissolved his government and handed over power to the military, and Egypt and perhaps much of the rest of the Arab world exploded with joy. As the Associated Press reported on February 12, 2011:

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt resigned his post and turned over all power to the military on Friday, ending his 30 years of autocratic rule and bowing to a historic popular uprising that has transformed politics in Egypt and around the Arab world.

The streets of Cairo exploded in shouts of “God is Great” moments after Mr. Mubarak’s vice president and longtime intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, announced during evening prayers that Mr. Mubarak had passed all authority to a council of military leaders.

Of course, the struggle for democracy and freedom was only starting in Tunisia and Egypt, and long, tumultuous, and unpredictable struggles lay ahead for these bellwethers of the Arab Uprising, which were beginning the transition to democracy after decades of dictatorship. Yet we do know that demonstrations intensified right after the success of the Egyptian Uprising in Yemen, Bahrain, Iran, and, most dramatically, Libya, inaugurating months of intense struggle that ultimately led to the victory of the anti-Qaddafi forces, the death of Qaddafi and one of
his sons, and the arrests of Qaddafi’s other sons, including his heir apparent, Saif-al Islam.\(^{66}\)

The global media had circulated images of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt that drove out dictators who had ruled with an iron fist for twenty-three and thirty-two years, respectively, and then gave up power when they saw that great masses of their own people were against them, while creating tremendous excitement throughout the Arab world and the global public sphere. The spectacle of the Arab Uprisings broadcast live on Al-Jazeera and other global networks inspired publics throughout North Africa and the Middle East to challenge their societies, to voice their grievances, to militate for radical social transformation, and to demonstrate against corrupt regimes.

**Tumult in the Arab World 2011: From the Arab Spring to a Bloody Arab Summer, Fall, and Winter**

Throughout the Middle East, after the Friday prayers, demonstrations would erupt in Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and other Arab countries in what was becoming a weekly ritual as the people of the region sought democracy and freedom.\(^{67}\) In Egypt, on February 6, after former prime minister Ahmed Shafik resigned following boisterous demonstrations that called for his removal because of his close relationship with Mubarak, Shafik was replaced by the popular former transportation minister, Essam Sharaf, who had quit his cabinet position in 2006 and had joined the demonstrators to oust Mubarak. When Sharaf went to Tahrir Square on March 4 to celebrate the change, he was hoisted on demonstrators’ shoulders and received a tumultuous greeting, broadcast live on Al-Jazeera.

There were reports that Egypt was undertaking a thoroughgoing “de-Mubaraking” of Egypt’s public spaces, replacing all signs and names of spaces citing Mubarak with alternatives, such as replacing the Mubarak subway station sign with one that read “Martyrs of the January 25th revolution.” Criminal investigations are being undertaken against Mubarak and other of his ministers, including his once powerful and feared interior minister, Habib el-Adly. Yet critics claimed that arbitrary arrest and torture were continuing, and that government officials were
burning documents that would indicate their complicity in Mubarak-era crimes.\textsuperscript{68}

Moving against the former state security apparatus, demonstrators in Alexandria burned down the hated state security headquarters, while a group in Cairo stormed the office and found officials burning documents. Some documents were taken out of the office, which contained information documenting the extent to which the Mubarak regime spied on and kept files on ordinary citizens, according to one of the demonstrators interviewed by Al-Jazeera (March 5, 2011). On March 7, Al-Jazeera reported that eight floors of underground cells were found in the Cairo state security headquarters, where opponents of the regime had been held and tortured.

Yet the dark side of the Egyptian Uprising was evident in Egypt on March 8, when groups of reactionary men confronted brave women in their demonstration on International Woman’s Day and told them to return to their houses. Egypt had long been plagued with a patriarchal society in which women were sexually harassed on a daily basis and considered inferior, and it appeared that the struggle between women and men would be a protracted one.\textsuperscript{69} That night, fights broke out between Christian Coptics protesting the burning of a church and Muslim thugs who clashed with them, leaving more than eleven dead.\textsuperscript{70} The next day, there were pictures on Al-Jazeera and other networks of Mubarak thugs attacking peaceful demonstrators in Cairo with knives, machetes, and whips, a horrific aftermath of Mubarak’s thug regime, which still lived on in brutal men who had assimilated its aggressive and violent tendencies, and who would continue to harass protestors in the months to come.

Tunisia, by contrast, was making swifter progress toward regime change and democratic rule. On March 7, the Associated Press released a report indicating that Tunisia had both named a new government and was the first country in the region to close down its much-hated secret police unit and state security department.\textsuperscript{71} Shortly thereafter, it was announced that former dictator Ben Ali’s party had been dissolved, although interviews with Tunisian citizens on Al-Jazeera indicated that many people had seen no real changes in their lives.

Graham Usher argues in “That Other Tunisia,” however, that there was a second grassroots movement in Tunisia that laid siege from January 14, 2011, when Ben Ali fled, into March, assembling in Tunis’s Cas-
bah Square and elsewhere in the country “to protest any and all attempts by the ancient regime to steal back the revolution. Having refused to open fire on demonstrators in the first revolution, Tunisia’s 30,000-strong army kept to its constitutional role in the second: it guarded public spaces, but allowed the struggle to play out between serial interim governments and what became known as the Casbah coalition.”

Usher argues that continued demonstrations and clashes with interim governments forced the resignation of Ben Ali-appointed governors in the provinces; the dissolution of his political party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD); the disbanding of the state security apparatus and dissolution of the hated secret police; and the legalization of parties previously banned. The struggles culminated, in Usher’s view, with the interim government bowing to the democratic forces’ key demand for elections to a constituent assembly that would be empowered to write a new constitution and prepare parliamentary elections. Usher acknowledges emerging divisions within the Tunisian democratic forces and the serious problems that they face in moving forward, including economic disparities and lack of jobs, but sees significant advances since the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime.

Hence, Egypt and Tunisia appeared to be moving forward slowly but surely, with unpredictable consequences through the summer and into the fall. Yet after eighteen days of the Libyan Uprising against Qaddafi and his family and cronies, a stalemate appeared to have been reached in Libya, with rebel forces controlling the east and Qaddafi’s forces controlling much of the west. In Egypt and Tunisia, by contrast, the people were attempting to come to terms with the oppression and crimes of their authoritarian states, and were beginning the slow and often tumultuous process of rebuilding their societies. Questions emerged concerning whether the Egyptian people would have genuine input into the building of democracy and whether new institutions and forms of power could be built.

Impressively, the people of Egypt and Tunisia had both overthrown corrupt dictators, and had expressed through nonviolent demonstrations their will for change and yearnings for democracy, freedom, social justice, and dignity. As Slavoj Žižek argued, the Egyptian (and arguably Tunisian) revolutions were secular, with demonstrators combining calls for democracy and freedom with demands for social justice. The upris-
ings exemplified the “People Power” movements of the 1960s, as well as the model of the “multitude” seizing power developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. As Hardt and Negri argued in a widely circulated article on the Arab Uprisings: “One challenge facing observers of the uprisings spreading across north Africa and the Middle East is to read them as not so many repetitions of the past but as original experiments that open new political possibilities, relevant well beyond the region, for freedom and democracy. Indeed, our hope is that through this cycle of struggles the Arab world becomes for the next decade what Latin America was for the last—that is, a laboratory of political experimentation between powerful social movements and progressive governments from Argentina to Venezuela, and from Brazil to Bolivia.”

Hardt and Negri do not mention here the role of charismatic Latin American leaders who galvanized social movements to win state power in democratic elections. In his documentary South of the Border (2010), Oliver Stone focuses on several presidents in Latin America who led movements to produce left and center-left regimes. While Stone arguably exaggerates the role of the charismatic Latin American leaders that he interviews in his film, and downplays the role of social movements, it is likely that the Latin American Left evolved a progressive agenda with a combination of charismatic leaders and progressive political parties aligned with social movements.

The question emerges from the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, however, whether movements and masses without charismatic leaders and progressive parties can construct a genuinely democratic society, without violence. Their challenge is also to generate political leaders and groups who nurture democratic institutions and social relations without developing oppressive modes of power and reverting to the old mode of authoritarian government and repression.

Yet as the Arab Spring passed into a hot and turbulent Arab Summer, and then into fall and winter, there continued to be intense political repression in Egypt. Six days of demonstrations in Tahrir Square from in late November and early December 2011 left at least forty-one dead and over one thousand injured in what protestors were calling a “second Egyptian revolution.” An uneasy peace ensued, and the first phase of planned elections for a people’s assembly that would create a constitutional government took place as scheduled with an extremely high turn-
out. The Muslim Brotherhood and more radical Islamic Salafis party won about 50 percent and 25 percent of the first round of voting, respectively, creating fears that elections might provide the road for an Islamic state, or a coup d’état by the military to prevent such an occurrence.\textsuperscript{76}

More violence broke out during the second round of elections in Egypt, and 2011 came to an end with very tense relations between the Egyptian military, who continued to wield power, the emerging political parties, and the Egyptian public. As noted, a Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won a close election in June 2012, had a parliamentary majority, declared autocratic powers for his presidency, and pushed through a constitution that many Egyptians believed threatened their rights and undermined democracy, leading to protests and rebellions against his regime, struggles that are still ongoing as I write in early 2013.

In Tunisia, by contrast, a moderate Islamic party, Ennahda, won 41 percent of the seats in the constitutional assembly in a national election and formed a transitional government with liberal and secular parties, although there continues to be unrest in the country and indeed throughout the region. Hence, just as the Arab Uprisings had multiple causes, so too did they have multiple and highly unpredictable consequences, which will be played out in the years to come.

**Concluding Comments**

During the Arab Uprisings, powerful new images of Arabs and their political awakening and uprisings circulated through the global media, subverting notions that the Arab people were passive, or an irrational mass periodically exploding in rages of anger with no constructive effects. From a global perspective, the Arab Spring of 2011 represents the beginning of a turbulent uprising of the Arab people against a series of authoritarian, dictatorial, and corrupt regimes that emerged from a long period of colonialism in the second half of the twentieth century. Anticolonialist revolts in the Arab world took the form of military coups, nationalist uprisings and struggles, or their combination, which in North Africa and throughout the Middle East resulted in authoritarian regimes that had become family dictatorships, corrupted by nepotism, cronyism, kleptocracy, and repressive state regimes of prison, torture, and murder.
to preserve absolute state power. While the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt displayed relatively nonviolent protest movements that drove dictators to flee, not surprisingly, violent state responses and repression took place in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and other countries that in turn generated intense political struggles, still ongoing in these countries.

As I have argued, the Arab Uprisings were global, circulating via broadcasting, new media and social networking, and word of mouth as similar tactics of struggle were used in proximate countries during the Arab Spring, generating media spectacles that inaugurated an era with similar democratic revolts and uprisings throughout the world. In this chapter, I have suggested that media spectacle can serve as a major category for explaining contemporary culture and politics, used to orchestrate war, terrorist events, political elections, and now political insurgencies and revolution. I’ve attempted to explicate my concept of media spectacle, to differentiate it from Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle, and to present the spectacle as a contested terrain. I’ve illustrated my concept of media spectacle through analysis of the North African Arab Uprisings of 2011, and my analysis suggests that media spectacle is now a major feature of political opposition and resistance and a major force against repressive regimes.

In a global media and Internet era, the state and corporations no longer control all means of communication, and the Internet provides a forum for political discourse of every spectrum. To be sure, the Internet and media spectacle alone do not produce social transformation, but mobilized and radicalized groups of people can use the Internet and social networking for informing, organizing, and mobilizing political movements and struggle, and the communication and messages from mass protest movements can themselves be a significant force of social change in the contemporary era.

Quite possibly, the media spectacles of the North African Arab Uprisings of 2011, followed by the Occupy movements, could be transformative events that should cheer advocates of a freer and more just world and that could inaugurate a new era in history. I argue that, from the time of the 9/11 terror attacks, we have been in a period that I call Terror War, in which spectacles of terror and fear of terrorism have driven media spectacle and shaped the imaginary of political regimes in the West.77 Part of the reason why the West, and in particular the U.S. gov-
ernment and intelligence services, did not anticipate the growing dissatisfaction and explosive uprisings in North Africa is that U.S. foreign policy and the imaginary of the Western media have been obsessed with fear of Islamic-inspired terrorism and have failed to see how masses of people living under dictatorship have been expressing their political opinions, mobilizing new groups and forces, and preparing to struggle against dictatorships and corrupt regimes.

Indeed, with the North African Arab Uprisings and Occupy movements of 2011, we may be entering a new phase of history in which people and new technologies become major driving forces of history, and revolution is once more on the historical agenda. In this emergent period, youth are playing critical roles in political struggle, as new thinking and political strategies are emerging to strengthen democracy and promote democratic social transformation in the contemporary era. On the other hand, reactionary and counterrevolutionary forces are confronting the democratic insurgent movements, creating the conditions for a highly turbulent and unpredictable future.

Notes

This study is extracted from Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and Insurrection, 2011: From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), and has been revised and updated to take account of events that happened after the book’s publication.


and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombings to the Virginia Tech Massacre (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2008).

2 I provide accounts of the O.J. Simpson trial and the Clinton sex and impeachment scandal in the mid-1990s in chapter 4 of Media Spectacle; engage the stolen election of 2000 in the Bush vs. Gore presidential campaign in Grand Theft 2000; and describe the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and their aftermath in From 9/11 to Terror War.


4 I engage the first Gulf War in The Persian Gulf TV War; the 9/11 and associated Al Qaeda terrorist attacks in From 9/11 to Terror War; the Iraq war of 2003 in Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy; and the Arab Awakening and Uprisings of 2011 in Media Spectacle and Insurrection.

5 For analyses of a diversity of types of media spectacle, see Kellner, Media Spectacle, which includes a historical genealogy of the spectacle going back to Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern cultures. Here I am only discussing media spectacle as it pertains to major sociopolitical events of the contemporary moment and their impacts on journalism and politics.


7 Debord, Society of the Spectacle, thesis 10.

8 Ibid., thesis 18.

9 Ibid., thesis 44.


14 On the impact of Guy Debord and the Situationist International on contemporary social theory and radical politics, see the sources in note 6 above.

15 See Kellner, *Media Spectacle*.

16 See Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*.

17 I argued that Barack Obama won the presidency in part because he mastered media spectacle in Douglas Kellner, “Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle,” *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009), and *Media Spectacle and Insurrection*. I draw on these studies in chapter 1 of *Media Spectacle and Insurrection*.

18 Perhaps an anti-Romney spectacle ultimately caused the Republican Party candidate to lose the election, with negative images of Romney circulating throughout much of the campaign. The Obama operatives early on put up attack ads against Romney, defining him as a heartless millionaire who likes to fire people. The mainstream broadcasting media, meanwhile, constantly presented Romney’s gaffes and problematic remarks, as with his off-record comment to rich campaign contributors that 47 percent of the population saw themselves as victims and would vote for Obama who would give them “gifts.” Hence, the Romney spectacle in the U.S. presidential campaign of 2012 was largely negative. On this presidential election, see my forthcoming article “Media Spectacle, the Romney Campaign, and the Triumph of Obama” (under review).

19 After initially using the discourse of “revolution” to describe the overthrow of dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, Al-Jazeera and other global networks used terms like “Libya’s Uprising,” “Egypt’s New Era,” and “Tunisia in Transition,” followed by terms like “the Arab Spring,” “the Arab Awakening,” or “the Arab Uprising,” to describe the events engaged in this chapter. Curiously, Wikipedia includes content on the events on the pages entitled “Tunisian Revolution,” “Egyptian Revolution of 2011,” and “Libyan Civil War (2011).” I follow Herbert Marcuse’s concept of
“revolution” as a rupture with the previous social order that develops new forms of economy, politics, culture, and social relations. See Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Editors’ note: We have chosen to keep this passage as it was written in its original version. There is something unmistakably open about the events of the Arab Spring. This sense of the unknown always risks becoming eclipsed once the “official” story of the Arab Spring is written, once these events are cynically recorded. After Mubarak came Morsi and then al-Sisi: *Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.*

I develop this analysis of the multiple causes of the Iraq war in *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy.*

To be sure, there were organized opposition movements to the Soviet regimes within the east-central Europe Soviet bloc countries and within the Soviet Union itself. For decades, these oppositional movements had been writing critiques of the regime, sometimes clandestinely circulated, and had organized opposition to the Soviet system. On the other hand, certainly the cascading collapse of one Communist regime after another, seen throughout Europe and the Communist bloc on television, and discussed on radio, newspapers, and other media, helped to mobilize massive crowds that led to the overthrow of those regimes. For a first-person account of these events, see the narrative and concise analysis by Timothy Garton Ash in *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of ’89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993, republished with a new afterword in 1999). Among other themes, Garton Ash describes the role of the media in making images of the oppositional movements visible to various publics and those movements’ struggle for media access. In a key summary judgment, Garton Ash wrote: “In Europe at the end of the twentieth century all revolutions are telerevolutions” (94). About the Prague Velvet Revolution, Garton Ash wrote that “television is now clearly opening up to report the revolution,” signaling that Václav Havel and the oppositional movement had won the revolution (101).

Francis Fukuyama famously argued that the collapse of Soviet Communism in the 1990s marked the triumph of Western ideas of freedom and democracy, and thus the end of major political conflicts; see *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). With the 9/11 terror attacks on the United States and the resulting era of Terror War, Fukuyama’s ideas were widely discredited. See Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War.* To some extent, though, the ideas of freedom and democracy are indeed part of the struggle in the North African Arab Uprisings,
which revealed that many more enemies of a free society had to be eliminated before one could seriously argue that we had entered the realm of freedom dreamed of by liberals and Karl Marx.


For reasons of space, I am not engaging the upheavals in Libya, which mutated from an uprising to what has been described as both a civil war and a revolution, events that I engage in detail in *Media Spectacle and Insurrection*.

For an account of previous self-immolations that helped mobilize protest movements, see Robert Wirth, “How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2011. See also the detailed account of Bouazizi’s life on Wikipedia, which also has a section on subsequent imitation of his self-immolation in other Middle East protest movements, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed_Bouazizi (accessed April 9, 2011). The “Werther effect” refers to mass suicides in eighteenth-century Europe after Goethe’s hero Werther took his life in a popular novel, and a wave of suicides occurred throughout the Middle East after Bouazizi’s immolation, although none of the other suicides appeared to have provided sparks for a revolution.

See Robert Mackey, “Video that Set Off Tunisia’s Uprising,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2011, http://thetlede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/22/video-that-triggered-tunisias-uprising/ (accessed March 10, 2011). This article recounts how “the desperate act of the vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, led to protests in the town, which were recorded in video clips posted on YouTube. By the time he died on Jan. 4, 2011, protests that started over Mr. Bouazizi’s treatment in Sidi Bouzid had spread to cities throughout the country.”


See Elizabeth Dickinson, “The First WikiLeaks Revolution,” *Foreign Policy*, 57
January 13, 2011, http://wikileaks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/13/wikileaks (accessed March 10, 2011). The text was widely circulated on the Internet. Dickinson wrote: “Tunisians didn’t need any more reasons to protest when they took to the streets these past weeks—food prices were rising, corruption was rampant, and unemployment was staggering. But we might also count Tunisia as the first time that WikiLeaks pushed people over the brink. These protests are also about the country’s utter lack of freedom of expression—including when it comes to WikiLeaks.” Laila Lalami argued as well, in “Tunisia Rising” (The Nation, February 7, 2011), that there were multiple causes for the uprising and that people generally were aware of the corruption of the Ben-Ali regime. Lalami also remarks that Western media hardly paid attention to the events in Tunisia, although they had thoroughly covered the Iranian uprisings of 2009, as they would with the Egyptian and Libyan uprisings.


Joel Beinin, “Egypt’s Workers Rise Up,” *The Nation*, March 7/14, 2011, www.thenation.com/article/158680/egypts-workers-rise (accessed March 9, 2011). Beinin claims that workers movements had very progressive aims from the beginning of the uprising: “At the appropriate moment, workers did not hesitate to fuse economic and political demands. On February 9, Cairo transport workers went on strike and announced that they would be forming an independent union. According to Hossam el-Hamalawy, a well-informed blogger and labor journalist, their statement also called for abolishing the emergency law in force for decades, removing the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) from state institutions, dissolving Parliament (fraudulently elected in 2010), drafting a new Constitution, forming a national unity government, prosecuting corrupt

41 See Alaa Al Aswany, On the State of Egypt.
44 In “Egypt’s Workers Rise Up,” Joel Beinin writes, “The events of January–February followed a decade of escalating mobilizations among many different sectors of Egyptian society—committees in solidarity with the Palestinian people and in opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq; the Kifaya (Enough) movement for democracy; doctors, judges, professors; and, above all, industrial and white-collar workers.”
47 See Wolman, The Instigators.
49 On the role of Al-Jazeera in Middle East politics, see Hugh Miles, Al-Jazeera: The Inside Story of the Arab News Channel That Is Challenging the West
Me dia S
Pe C ta C le  and the
a R a B U PR i S in G S
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52 On the Mubarak regime, see the sources in note 38.


Gamil Ghobrial, email message to author, February 14, 2011.

54 Miriyyam Aouragh and Anne Alexander note that “online viewership of Al-Jazeera English reached record growth rates during the demonstrations in Egypt (2,500%). For specific data on Egypt, see www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/EG and for its overall growth rates, see www.alexa.com/siteinfo/aljazeera.net.” Aouragh and Alexander, “The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution,” International Journal of Communication 5 (2011): 1348. Aouragh and Alexander provide an excellent account of how Internet activists in the Egyptian revolution used various new media in different phases of the struggle. They recognize the importance of Al-Jazeera and global television networks as well, and argue that the Egyptian revolution presents fresh insights into the connections between new media, satellite television networks, and political struggle.

See the sources on Al-Jazeera in note 49 above. See Leon Barkho, “The Role of Internal Guidelines in Shaping News Narratives: Ethnographic Insights into the Discursive Rhetoric of Middle East Reporting by the BBC and Al-Jazeera English,” Critical Discourse Studies, 8, no. 4 (2011), which examines internal guidelines and news production practice of Al-Jazeera and the BBC (although in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict, so the study does not touch on the issues engaged in this study). My own studies focus on how Al-Jazeera English functioned in the Arab Uprisings and other momentous struggles and spectacles of 2011. Barkho notes that there are differences between Al-Jazeera Arabic and English, as well as overlaps, but as far as I know, there are no scholarly studies of the differences between Al-Jazeera English and Arabic in covering the Arab Uprisings, and I have been confined to the Al-Jazeera English channel and website.
Marc Lynch argues, “The period from 1997–2002 well deserves the much-abused title of ‘the Al-Jazeera Era.’ Building on its successful coverage of Iraq, as well as the second Palestinian Intifada and its exclusive access to Afghanistan after 9/11, Al-Jazeera dominated Arab public discourse for these crucial years.” Lynch, Voices of the New Arab Public, 128. While this is arguably true, I would say that during the North African Arab Uprisings, Al-Jazeera became not only a global media force, but also a voice and primary influence on the dramatic uprisings of the period. Hence, while the “CNN moment” marked the time when CNN became the dominant source of news, images, and opinion during the Gulf War of 1991, Al-Jazeera became a globally recognized source of news and opinion during the North African Arab Uprisings, and arguably a major force in inciting the insurrections (an argument made by the Qaddafi regime and government officials from other countries, as well as by scholars).

Clinton’s March 2, 2011, testimony can be found on the website Mediaite, at www.mediaite.com/tv/hillary-clinton-claims-al-jazeera-is-winning-an-information-war-that-america-is-losing (accessed December 22, 2011). Scandalously, many cable systems in the United States do not carry Al-Jazeera, although some, like my Los Angeles Time-Warner system, play its news programs on some PBS channels, and, of course, it is available via the Internet at www.aljazeera.com (accessed December 8, 2011). Interestingly, in January 2012, Al-Jazeera bought Al Gore’s cable channel Current TV to make into an Al-Jazeera America channel, but my local Time-Warner cable company immediately took off Current TV, although soon after they added Al-Jazeera America to their cable lineup.

For a balanced view of the Muslim Brotherhood and the groups’ role in the uprising, see the PBS Frontline episode “The Brothers,” broadcast February 22, 2011; on the weekend of March 5–6, BBC Reports, however, presented a more unsettling report on the Brotherhood, highlighting their radical Islamic roots and current orientation. For a scholarly examination, see Alison Pargeter, The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition (London: Saqi, 2010). Of course, the Brotherhood is now under close scrutiny, as it has gained power in Egypt.


Andy Morgan, “From Fear to Fury.”


On the course of the Libyan revolution through 2012, see the account in Kellner, Media Spectacle and Insurrection, chapter 3.


The brutalization and rape of CBS reporter Lara Logan in the celebrations after Mubarak’s resignation is one of the horrors of the Egyptian revolution. Logan was separated from her crew and brutally assaulted and raped until Egyptian women and soldiers rescued her. See “Lara Logan Assaulted during Egypt Protests,” CBS News, www.cbsnews.com/stories/

On the situation of the Christian Copts in Egypt, see Al Aswany, *On the State of Egypt*.


The Occupy movements present other examples of leaderless movements, perhaps a defining feature of the uprisings of 2011, in which anyone can participate and create their own parts in the spectacle they choose.


See my analysis of this epoch in Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War*. 