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Technology and the Revolutions of 1848 and 2011

How technology can work towards catalyzing popular revolutions

On 17 December 2010, a Tunisian market-seller named Mohammad Bouazizi set himself alight in protest against the closure of his stall by police. His self-immolation unleashed a torrent of pent-up anger against the authoritarian rule of the government, police and the country's political elites. After a month of protests, president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled the country for twenty-four years, fled the country on 14 January 2011. The demonstrations in Tunisia spilled over into other Arab states.

Egyptians rose against Hosni Mubarak, the epicentre of their protests in Tahrir Square beginning on 25 January, finishing with the president's resignation on 11 February after thirty years in power and hundreds of deaths. The first major demonstration in Yemen took place in Sana'a on 27 January. Within a week, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled for thirty-three years, announced that he would stand down in 2013, but this did not placate the opposition. Violence escalated, Saleh fled the country to Saudi Arabia on 4 June (for medical treatment after he was wounded in a bomb attack), but did not formally relinquish power until February 2012. In Libya, protests began in the east of the country on 15 February and Colonel Gaddafi's brutal response sparked civil war, aerial intervention by NATO, the fall of Tripoli to rebels on 21 August and the summary shooting of Gaddafi in Sirte on 20 October. The Al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain was shaken as protesters first took to the streets on 14 February, but clung on with the help of troops sent by the Saudis and other Gulf states. The civil war that is still raging – indeed escalating – in Syria began on 18 March 2011, when government forces shot protesters dead in Daraa, sparking an uprising against Bashir al-Assad's Ba'athist regime. These were only the most striking of the breathless events that swept the Middle East in the 'Arab Spring', or 'Arab Awakening'. There were protests in other Arab states, such as Morocco, Algeria and Jordan, Oman and Lebanon, but also in non-Arab ones, like the Sudan, Iran and Mauritania. Observers have been struck not only by the common, underlying factors and the interconnections between the protests, but also by the sheer rapidity with which they spread across political boundaries, as well as the capacity of the opposition in almost every country involved to mobilise and sustain broad coalitions against the existing regimes. Parallels have been made between the revolutions of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe, but, less obviously (because not in living memory) the European Revolutions of 1848.

In 1848, the revolutionary challenge arose against the monarchist, authoritarian systems that, like those of the Arab states had held sway for many years, in this case over Europe since the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815. The Revolutions of 1848 dramatically broke through this conservative wall that had (more or less) held liberal and nationalist in check for more than a generation. The revolutionaries of 1848, in contrast to those of 2011, were only briefly triumphant, since the old regimes were able to strike back with astounding rapidity and success.

Yet what astounded contemporaries in 1848, as they did in 2011, was the speed with which the revolutions spread from one place to another and the rapidity with which the old regime folded or yielded against the pressure. The first major outbreaks occurred in Italy, with an insurrection starting on 12 January in Palermo, spreading to Naples on 27 January and then moving northwards, reaching Turin on 8 February and Florence three days later. Yet the great epicentre was Paris, because of its now traditional associations with revolution. The French capital exploded in violence between 22 and 24 February, toppling the monarchy and establishing the Second French Republic. When the news crossed the Rhine, there were demonstrations in Baden from 27 February, which spread across Germany: the Heidelberg Assembly met on 5 March to lay the foundations for the German parliament which would meet in Frankfurt. The revolutions spread even to the Habsburg Empire, with its capital in Vienna, where one of the greatest architects of the post-Napoleonic order, Clemens von Metternich, had held sway first as Foreign Minister and then as Chancellor since 1809. Protests rumbled in Prague on 11 March, but the revolutionary wave gathered fresh momentum with the uprising in Vienna itself, bringing about what had been unthinkable to most people for almost forty years: the fall of Metternich on 13 March. The shockwaves from the events in Vienna sparked further revolutions within the Habsburg Empire – in Budapest on 15 March, Austrian-ruled Milan three days later and Venice on 22 March. The events in Vienna also rebounded back into Germany: Berlin, the Prussian capital, was wracked by one of the bloodiest insurrections of this, the 'Springtime of Peoples', on 15 March. In these places liberals took power, either by toppling the old order altogether (as in Palermo, Paris, Milan and Venice), or by forcing the existing rulers to appoint liberal governments promising wider reform. Constitutions were to be introduced where none had existed, or reformed where they

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already did. Civil liberties were to be guaranteed. In countries under foreign domination (northern Italy, Poland and Romania), or where ethnic groups were divided into different polities (Germany, and, again, Italy, Poland and Romania), the liberals aimed at nothing less than national liberation and unification.

Two of the most striking similarities between the two revolutionary waves in 1848 and 2011 were therefore the speed with which they spread across state boundaries and their widespread success mobilising the opposition to the established order within the countries affected. In both cases, commentators and analysts have pondered many factors, different long and short-term causes, but they have also debated how central were modern communications to the success of the revolutionary waves. No one disputes that in the Arab Revolutions (as indeed in previous uprisings or protests, such as the election protests in Iran in 2009), participants made effective use of mobile phones, Twitter and Facebook, while international broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera beamed images and reports of the revolutions across international boundaries. In 1848, of course, no such instant forms of communication existed, but to contemporaries they were no less dramatic: steam power in the shape of the railway engine, the riverboat and the seagoing steamship, but also (albeit to a much lesser extent), the telegraph.

Yet, even as the revolutions of 2011 were still gathering pace, many analysts were already warning against ascribing too much explanatory power to the role of communications. Charles Ragin made the common sense point in 1987 that complex social phenomena do not have one cause, but many which function only in conjuncture with one another.[1] This of course applies to 2011: media and communications technology on its own is never enough to make a revolution. No historian has argued that 1848 was *caused* by the (relative) speed of communications. Ethan Zuckerman, reflecting on the 'Twitter Revolution' in *Foreign Affairs* on 14 January 2011, warns that 'any attempt to credit a massive political shift to a single factor -- technological, economic, or otherwise -- is simply untrue. Tunisians took to the streets due to decades of frustration, not in reaction to a WikiLeaks cable, a denial-of-service attack, or a Facebook update'.[2]

Similarly, in 1848, the news of revolutions in Paris, Vienna or elsewhere rarely, if ever, triggered the revolution *immediately*. What the news did do was to inspire, encourage – to create the psychological and moral conditions in which change suddenly seemed possible. Consequently, the news tended to encourage pressure by opposition groups, sometimes acting within legal or quasi-legal channels at first, in order to persuade the existing governments to make concessions, precisely to avoid the revolutionary cascade that appeared to be imminent. These were often supported by petitions, demonstrations or marches in the streets, but flashpoints that ignited these protests into violent revolution were localised: a misunderstanding between protesters and the forces of order (Vienna); a volley fired off by nervous soldiers (Paris); or the jostling between army and civilians unleashing longer-standing tensions (Berlin). So the spread of the news of revolution from one place to another excited political protest, but it rarely provided the spark within itself that immediately turned these protests into violent revolution. Rather, the rapid spread of news acted on already finely-balanced situations, *priming* both the authorities and the opposition for action, but whether the outcome would be peaceful or violent, bring reforms from the government or revolutionary change 'from below', all depended upon a range of other factors, both contingent and structural, short- and long-term.

A similar pattern has been emerging in the Arab world. First, the Tunisian revolution was 'sparked' by the flame of Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation. News of the success of the Tunisian revolt in turn inspired Egyptians to join demonstrations on Tahrir square. Protests against police brutality were planned for 25 January but nobody, especially not the activist-organisers, foresaw what was to come.[3] In Libya and Syria protesters embarked on similar paths but took a tragic turn towards civil war early on. Elsewhere in the region protests have had mixed results. As in 1848, news encouraged protest, but chance, it seems, brought revolt.

Chance, however, is the opposite of explanation. If we were to reply 'chance' to the question 'What caused the Arab revolutions?' we would be far from an answer. In fact, it is quite reasonable to consider the reduction of contingency to be the entire point of social (if not historical) research. If we were to investigate the role of social media in the Revolutions of 2011, we will see that technology explains *how* they unfolded, but not necessarily *why* they did so. 1848 and 2011 demonstrate that technology can, in certain circumstances, *interact* with pre-existing social and political tensions to provoke a radical shift in the distribution of power between state and its citizens.

The technology at play in 1848 was diverse: the most dramatic, because the fastest, was the telegraph, but the European network was still very restricted: there is a story that a few years after the 1848 Revolutions, Reuters used carrier pigeons to make the connections between telegraph stations and railheads. There seems to have been only one instance where the telegraph spread the news from one European capital to another – and in that case it did not spark a revolution: rather, the

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[1] See C. Ragin The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies (California: University of California Press, 1987).

[2] E. Zuckerman, 'The First Twitter Revolution?' Foreign Policy 14 January 2011 (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/14/the_first_twitter_revolution?page=0,1).

[3] W. Ghonim, Revolution 2.0 (New York: Fourth Estate, 2012)

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telegram in question was sent by the banker Salomon Rothschild to Metternich. The message warned Metternich of the fall of the French monarchy in Paris on 24 February 1848. Yet so fragmentary was the European network that the message did not reach Metternich in Vienna until 5 p.m. on 29 February – in other words, five days later, and this was only a day or so before the rest of the city's population learned about the dramatic Parisian events from a more traditional source – the newspapers. A more widespread form of technology – and certainly more decisive in spreading word of revolution from one country to the next - was steam power, namely the steam train and riverboat, both of which were used throughout 1848 to transmit news and to carry political actors to the scene of action. The initial wave of revolution in 1848 was driven to a large extent by steam power. To cite one of the most dramatic instances, word of the fall of Metternich in Vienna on 13 March arrived in Budapest on 14 March, carried by the paddle-steamer that regularly sailed down the Danube from Vienna; it arrived by train in Prague on 15 March, Berlin on 16 March and Milan on 17 March. Venice learned of the momentous event on 17 March, via the Lloyd Line steamer that had sailed from Trieste. So disconnected was the European rail and steam network that it still took several days for the news to reach these cities, but the essential point is that if, by the standards of 2011 this was hardly a rapid dissemination of news, by those of the first half of the nineteenth century, they were positively head-spinning. So the revolutions were certainly inter-connected by technology: the rapid spread of news from one epicentre to another appeared to have encouraged political engagement and action. Yet, bearing in mind that what matters in these revolutionary situations is not the technology on its own, but rather how it relates to a deeper social crisis, then perhaps the most significant application of steam power was not to forms of transportation, but to some other, longer-standing form of communication and social engagement.

In an interesting article on the role of forms of communication in the Arab Revolution, Ramesh Srinivasan argues that the focus on technology ignores a weightier factor in the events of 2011, namely 'synergies are created between classes to mobilize as a network without depending on social media. In Egypt, these networks may include family connections, neighborhoods, mosques, and historical institutions, such as the previously banned Muslim Brotherhood. New technologies hardly erode or overwhelm these classic models of communication and information sharing.'[4] Srinivasan is not alone. Her analysis echoes that of numerous commentators and scholars. The opposing view is most widespread, perhaps surprisingly, amongst the revolutionaries themselves. Wael Ghonim, probably the most successful Facebook activist of the revolution has famously commented 'If you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet.'[5] Whether or not this is simply hyperbole is beside the point. There is some disparity between what commentators think happened, and what participants are telling us. This is in part fuelled by an empirical black hole, quite unavoidable with such recent events. What little data we have seems to bear out the suggestion that social media mattered as much, and in similar ways, in 2011 as in 1848 to the protesters. The most reliable information we have on media use in the Arab uprisings comes from the Tahrir Data Project, a mass survey conducted in Tahrir square over the eighteen days of Egyptian revolt. The study found that of all the communication technologies imaginable, Facebook was the third most used by protesters after television and conversation respectively. The most common reason respondents provided for watching television or listening to radio is that they had no access to other media. All in all protesters said they trusted social media more than traditional media – and why not? The press, television and radio were under the control of the state.[6]

Yet, as Mario Diani, an expert on the relationship between social movements and technology, argues, 'technology interacts with other factors to shape patterns of collective action. Among those factors are certainly the relational settings in which protesters are embedded, and which are at the same time created or re-shaped by the unfolding of collective action'.[7] In other words, the technology may help to mobilise and assemble people into a political movement, but longer-standing social and cultural bonds create the durable networks and organisations which are able to *sustain* the resistance to the forces of order: in 2011, it was famously the role that Friday prayers had in Cairo in mobilising the protesters on Tahrir Square. In 1848, these forms of sociability included clubs (such as the aristocratic 'Jockey Club' in Milan, an imitation of a British-style club), shooting and gymnastic associations (85,000 members in 250 branches in Germany in 1847); choral societies (100,000 members in Germany); cafés (the Café Pilvax in Budapest was the haunt of the Magyar radicals), but also artisanal guilds, worker's 'self-improvement' societies, as well as workshops, markets and neighbourhoods. It is significant that even in a city with such a revolutionary heritage as Paris, most of the working-class insurgents of 1848, when questioned later, often explained that they

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[4] R. Srinivasan, 'London, Egypt and the nature of social media', Washington Post 11 August, 2011. (http: / / www.washingtonpost.com / national / on-innovations / london-egypt-and-the-complex-roleof-social-media / 2011 / 08 / 11 / gIQAIoud8I_print.html).

[5] CNN Newsroom, 11 February, 2011. 'Egyptian activist, Wael Ghonim 'Facebook to thank for freedom' YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS4-d_Edius)

[6] Wilson and Dunn, 'Digital Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Descriptive Analysis from the Tahrir Data Sets', International Journal of Communications, 5 (2011), pp.1254-9

[7] M. Diani, 'Networks and Internet into Perspective', Swiss Political Science Review, vol. 17, no 4 (2011), p. 469.

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were fighting to defend their neighbourhoods, firstly and foremost.

So the collective action of 1848, as in 2011, was shaped by a combination of organisations from within civil society and the norms of day-to-day communal relationships. The former, in particular, even where heavily policed and censored, offered a space in which political and social ideas could be discussed, albeit if safely veiled behind metaphors and opaque language. These developments amounted to the growth of 'critical publics' across Europe, publics that played a role analogous to the highly-educated but heavily censored young population in the Arab states in 2011. In both Europe prior to 1848 and the Arab world prior to 2011, these were critical publics which were almost everywhere excluded from formal participation in the legal political framework. It has been calculated that, for every one Parisian who had the right to vote in parliamentary elections prior to 1848, there were *twenty* who subscribed to a newspaper. Such a striking statistic exposes the limitations of the old order and the latent possibilities for a serious rupture between the state and civil society.

Yet the very expansion of civil society, which opened forms of political action to a wider cross-section of society was *certainly* made possible by certain technological advances. The technology was not necessarily a speeding train or steamboat, but steam-power applied in a different way - that is, to printing. In 1811, the London-based German printer, Friedrich Koening and his partner, the engineer Andreas Bauer, produced a press that was remarkable in two ways: firstly, it used steam power, secondly, it allowed text to be printed off cylinders, rather than by the up-and-down motion of the older 'flatbed' press. This meant that text and images could be produced far quicker – and more cheaply – than before. The London *Times* made the first commercial use of this technology in late 1814, and it was found that the machine could run off no less than 1,100 pages an hour. Once a method was devised to print on both sides of a sheet at once, a significant step had been made in the evolution of the mass media in both newspapers and books.[8] With the benefit of the hindsight offered by 1848, if anything marked the critical technological breakthrough which began to shift the relationship between the state and civil society, it was this, rather than the high-speed communications of the train or steamship.

We need not look far to find a technological parallel with 2011. Steam printing appears from this perspective as a primitive re-tweet. The authors of the Tahrir Data Project study have coined a term to capture this idea of sharing information, *relay*. Of the users and consumers of all forms of social media, a list which includes newspaper readers, radio listeners, television viewers in addition to those using Facebook, SMS, Twitter &c., *every* respondent reported relaying some information. Of these, Facebook, Twitter and conversation were the most common means of relaying information.[9] In 2011 the challenge for online activists was to translate Facebook activism into offline demonstration. This relay function, the inexorable dissemination of information, was the most decisive contribution technology could make to both the restriction of the state and the enlargement of civil society.

Impressive though this achievement was, it was not the only crucial factor: two other developments were essential. Firstly, printed material in 1848, or electronic communications in 2011 could not exist without a demand for it, and here, in a sense, the old regimes were victims of their own success, since they oversaw an expansion in education and, in the case of the Arab regimes, standards of living. The problem was that, in both cases, there were severe restraints on opportunities for those whose ambitions and expectations had been galvanised by these developments. In mid-nineteenth century Europe, Lenore O'Boyle has argued, a fundamental structural problem arose because there was 'an excess of educated men' – people who were skilled and intellectually well-trained, but neither the state nor the economy had grown enough to provide the opportunities in which they could use these attributes and realise their ambitions.[10] In the Arab states, a similar imbalance has arisen. While growth rates during the global economic crisis slowed, they 'bottomed out' in 2009 at 3 per cent (Tunisia), 6 per cent (Libya) and 4.7 per cent (Egypt) and then recovered; in the last decade of Mubarak's rule, 9 per cent of the population were pulled from 'absolute poverty'. Yet not all parts of society benefited equally – and the people who received the thin end of the wedge were the region's young: in early 2011, unemployment among people in their early twenties stood at 28 per cent in Egypt, 30 per cent in Tunisia and a staggering 50 per cent in Yemen.[11] The old regimes in both 1848 and 2011, in other words, created the worst of both worlds: they helped to educate young people, but then failed to nurture the conditions in which they could realise their ambitions, or even simply find employment. At the same time – and here is the second point, while they also tried to restrict their civil liberties and deny them a political voice, both in 1848 and in 2011 disgruntled citizens did carve out outlets for their cultural and political energies in the forms of the associations and sociability of the kinds already mentioned. While censorship and repression existed almost everywhere, there were ways around it – and in 2011, of course, the internet was central to this, the point here being that it was longer-term engagement with ideas, influences and dissent that shaped the revolutionary opposition. This was what arose in the years before 1848: in northern Italy, for example,

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8 H. Bolza, 'Friedrich Koenig und die Erfindung der Druckmaschine', Technikgeschichte, vol. 34, no. 1 (1967), pp. 79–89.

9 Wilson and Dunn, op. cit,, p. 1255.

10 L. O'Boyle, 'The Problem of an Excess of Educated Men in Western Europe, 1800-1850', Journal of Modern History xlii (1970).

11 P. Mason, Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 119.

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seemingly innocuous discussions at scientific congresses found ways of evoking the symbols of opposition to Austrian rule. At the 1847 congress held in Venice, the name of the Italian liberal icon of the moment, Pope Pius IX, was mentioned as often as possible, while speakers on agriculture tried to slip the word 'potatoes' into their discussions frequently, since the word was also habitually applied by Italians to Austrian soldiers. In Metternich's Austria, the police in charge of the system of censorship simply did not have enough personnel to keep up with all its tasks, which included the opening of foreign post, as well as the regulation of printed material, so liberal literature slipped through the net, and it was read in the high-brow intellectual clubs and societies of Vienna. In France, the republican opposition got around a ban on political meetings by holding banquets instead: no regime can ban eating. It was the controversy over a banquet planned in the particularly radical district around the Panthéon in Paris that brought about the revolutionary situation which finally toppled the July Monarchy in February 1848. Sometimes, people simply published and were damned: the government tried to ban a cartoon depicting King Louis-Philippe metamorphosing into a pear, which was a play on his jowly physiognomy. Yet it availed them nothing, for even Parisian street urchins – the living incarnations of Victor Hugo's Gavroche – simply chalked 'Poire' on walls and pavements.

Wherever there was a revolution in 1848, this scope for political and social activity expanded dramatically with the collapse of censorship and policing: in Paris, literally hundreds of political clubs sprang up; citizen's militias were set up or were democratised: in both Vienna and Prague, the students formed 'Academic Legions'. There was an explosion in the press, in political associations and trades unions. While nowhere were women given the right to vote**,** they participated in revolutionary politics in other ways, not least by offering logistical and medical support on the barricades, working as revolutionary journalists (most famously, perhaps was George Sand), and organising women's political clubs and unions.

In 2011, revolutionary Cairo witnessed the explosion of 'Popular Committees' on the 28th of January. This was the day of the second major protest, the so-called 'day of rage'. As one protester put it, "The 28th was when people perceived. I mean starting from the end of the Friday prayers, until people settled in Tahrir at night. That process where a demonstration became a revolution and you saw the very quick decay and collapse of the police, that was spectacular. It was clear that the end had begun. I think the 28th was, it was a deal maker"[12]

This was also the day the police abandoned Cairo suddenly, the gaols were opened and the prisoners released to terrify the population. We can speculate as to why these events took place, what matters is their consequence. In every district of Cairo the citizens organised into autonomous, self-governing, self-policing units. This happened in the space of one day and one night. These associations, without precedent in authoritarian Egypt, lasted at least the two weeks until Mubarak's resignation. Some continue to function in one capacity or another.[13]

1848 and 2011 therefore represent one of those moments where the existing political fabric was dramatically punctured, creating an opening through which an alternative way of organising politics and society was able to surge. For a few months, the balance of power tilted dramatically away from the state to civil society. This, in fact, might be one definition of 'revolution': a sudden, rapid but decisive shift in political power and political legitimacy from the state to civil society.
This definition is not without its flaws, but it has two advantages. Firstly, it defines revolution invariably on the basis on action 'from below', since the definition is predicated on the need for a dramatic surge in cultural and political activity by the individuals and organisations in the public sphere. Thus '1776' and '1789' therefore qualify as revolutions, because of the explosion in cultural and political activity and debate that preceded and accompanied them, as does the February Revolution in Russia in 1917, but the Bolshevik coup of October that year does not, because it restored the power of the centralised state, one which became militarised over the course of the Civil War that followed. In fact, in this definition, the October 1917 coup was a counter-revolution, since it decisively shifted power back to the state, after eight months of chaos which brought the entire state to the brink of collapse. Secondly, as this (admittedly controversial) example suggests, it defines revolution independently of its normal political association with the Left, restoring it to a more neutral status. Thus '1989' is most definitely a revolution because, although countering the Marxist-Leninist conception of a revolutionary regime, it was both encouraged by and then vastly expanded the scope for the structures of civil society to act. The 'Nazi Revolution' from 1933 onwards is not a revolution because, although it dramatically re-ordered German state and society, it did so by shifting the balance of power strongly towards the state. It was therefore a counter-revolution against the political and cultural freedom of the Weimar Republic that preceded it. In effect, the Revolutions of 1848 and 2011 represent a redistribution of power between the government and the people, but the people organised in civil society, a civil society made vibrant by a diverse range of sociability and cultural activity, of which, in 2011, social

[12] University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution. Rare Books and Special Collections Library. American University in Cairo (http://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15795coll7/id/291/rec/10)

[13] Bremer, J, "Leadership and Collective Action in Egypt's Popular Committees: Emergence of Authentic Civic Activism in the Absence of the State." Paper presented to the inaugural conference of the Africa Network of the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR), Stellenbosch, South Africa, August 2011.

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media was perhaps the most striking, but not the only form.

Yet in 1848, the shift proved to be temporary. With the final defeat of the revolutions by the autumn of 1849, the balance was tipped back the other way, but this, ironically, happened with the help of the instruments of civil society and communication itself. Civil society and technology are 'neutral vessels' and monarchs and the authoritarians moved rapidly to adopt them for their own uses. Prussia provides two interesting examples of such structures at work in favour of the conservative order. There the *Kreuzzeitung* became popular because it combined humour with hard-boiled political analysis. One of its more prolific contributors was Otto von Bismarck. Alongside this, the Association for King and Fatherland recruited some 60,000 members in 100 branches across Germany. Just as the revolutionaries could harness the energies and organisational capacity of civil society and the printed word, so, too could conservatives.
It is unlikely that history will repeat, even approximately. Still, the historical comparison is justified and beneficial. The message that proponents of democracy in the Middle East today should take from history is exactly to organise, communicate and disseminate via every medium available. The analytical task, on the other hand, of explaining the role of what is today called 'social media' in revolution is precarious. Either it is both cause and effect (or one dimension of both) or is so intricate a cause that it is impossible to discern in which direction the causal arrow points. First, communications technologies interact with both social and political tensions which long predate the conflict. Second, in consequence, communications facilitate a transfer in both political power and legitimacy from the state to civil society. The indeterminacy of the role of communications, its apparent flexibility, is a messy empirical reality known to social scientists as 'endogenous variation'. Communications technologies are not an external, exogenous, factor bearing upon the course of history but are internal, endogenous, to the revolution itself.

The evidence from Cairo and elsewhere is encouraging. The micro-society of Tahrir square with its own food provision, health care, cleaning and so on, is in many ways symbolic of the crash course in civic and political engagement being undertaken widely in the region. Karl Polanyi noticed that in Britain during the industrial revolution, the state appeared to wake up to the fact that society exists: he called this the 'discovery of society'. This body was separate from the state but not subordinate. Government from then on could no longer 'rule' society, but could only attempt to interfere in it where and when it could. This, according to Polanyi, was the 'great transformation' of the Industrial Revolution.[14] Something akin to this took place in Europe in 1848: perhaps that is what is taking place today in the Middle East?

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[14] K. Polanyi, The Great Transformation (Boston: Beacon 1967) pp. 128,129