Facebook Friend or Foe: Private Platforms and the Right to Expression in Pre- and Post-Arab Spring Egypt

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Abstract

A decade after the Arab Spring, present-day restrictions on the human right to expression in Egypt reveal a shift in the narrative of technologies: tools of public liberation or state control. While used in 2011 to share information, connect with others, and gain global attention, technologies in today's Egypt control the public, limit their information access, and restrict their freedom of expression. In contrast to the Arab Spring, public and private actors employ a new architecture to control the public sphere, persecute the public with misinformation, and manipulate users—undermining human rights. Through the case study of post-Arab Spring Egypt, this paper explores how perceptions of technologies shifted from their perception of advancing political mobilization to impeding public expression. As the transition from the Arab Spring to today reveals, authoritarian and capitalist tactics, just like technologies, can change significantly in a short time. Human rights protections must also keep up.

I. Introduction

"Combating terrorism is a human right, a new right that I am adding to human rights in Egypt," declared Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi at an international conference in 2017.[1] He delivered this statement just weeks after the country blocked access to the Human Rights Watch website in response to the organization's report on systematic torture in Egyptian jails.[2] Contrary to his claims they expand human rights, al-Sisi's tactics to oppress 'violence' seem to violate human rights within Egypt. Blocking Human Rights Watch attacks the right to expression by restricting access to human rights resources revealing the truth about Egypt's torture practices. This limit on expression comes only five years after the Arab Spring protests (2010-2012), celebrated as an illustration of the power of technologically mediated expression to

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[1] Amr Magdi, "'We Need To Talk' About Sisi's Twisted Take On Human Rights," *Open Democracy*, November 20, 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/we-need-to-talk-sisi-human-rights-world-youth-forum-egypt/.

[2] "Egypt Blocks Human Rights Watch Website Amid Widespread Media Blockade," *Reuters*, September 7, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-rights/egypt-blocks-human-rights-watch-website-amid-widespread-media-blockade-idUSKCN1BI310.

achieve forms of political change. Since the Arab Spring, the narrative of technologies shifted from their perception of advancing political mobilization to impeding public expression. Drawing on Zeynep Tufekci's book *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*[3] and Shoshana Zuboff's chapter "'We Make Them Dance:' Surveillance Capitalism, the Rise of Instrumentarian Power, and the Threat to Human Rights,"[4] these works reveal the deeper shift in social architecture underlying the transition from technology perceived as encouraging or inhibiting freedom of expression. While used during the Arab Spring to share information, connect with others, and gain global attention, technologies in today's Egypt control the public, limit their information access, and restrict their freedom of expression. In contrast to the Arab Spring, public and private actors employ a new architecture to control the public sphere, persecute the public with misinformation, and manipulate users.

II. Tahrir Square: "We are Egypt on the Internet"

During the 2011 Arab Spring, technology seemed to enable expression and social mobilization by expanding the public sphere and increasing attention towards the movement. The Tahrir Square protest, the culmination of the Arab Spring in Egypt, prompted the resignation of autocratic President Hosni Mubarak, hailed as a victory for protesters and human rights. According to Tahrir Square activist 'Ali,' the "people who showed up in Tahrir weren't just your friends...they were your Facebook friends".[5] The common thread between Egypt's Tahrir Square protesters was not their background, class, or location—but Facebook. For example, the "We Are All Khaled Said" movement on Facebook revealed the interconnectedness of the Egyptian public. After posting a video documenting police corruption online, police targeted Khaled Said, killing him after tracking him down to an Internet cafe and smashing his head against an iron gate.[6] Instead of police getting away with this atrocity, Facebook enabled the public to mobilize and express their horror at the regime's actions. Through the

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[3] Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, April 24, 2018).

[4] Shoshana Zuboff, "'We Make Them Dance': Surveillance Capitalism, the Rise of Instrumentarian Power, and the Threat to Human Rights," in *Human Rights in the Age of Platforms*, ed. Rikke Frank Jørgensen, (MIT Press, 2019).

[5] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, 24.

[6] David Wolman, "The Digital Road to Egypt's Revolution," *New York Times*, February 10, 2012, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/02/12/opinion/sunday/20120212-tahir-timeline.html.

platform, Wael Ghonim started the "We Are All Khaled Said" page. Membership grew rapidly—within only two minutes, the page had over 300 members.[7] The page's prominence expanded beyond Egypt and struck a global audience by revealing that "police brutality, human dignity, freedom" are "universal issues, not political issues" confined to Egypt, as Ghonin notes.[8] By January 2011, the page had over 500,000 supporters when Ghonin posted to the group, "If 100,000 take to the streets, no one can stop us."[9] This incited the mass protest on January 25th in Tahrir Square. Tufekci further attributes the protesters' success to their ability to "capture the world's attention."[10] In addition to the thousands of people protesting in person, the global Facebook membership supported the protests virtually and vicariously. This extended global community supporting the Tahrir Square protesters drew greater attention to the movement. Social media platforms enabled the Egyptian and global public to connect over shared discontent with the regime, mobilize beyond the digital barrier in person in Tahrir Square, and oust Mubarak in an apparent victory for the right of expression. Seemingly "Egypt's young people on the Internet," as the protesters called themselves, achieved their goals through free expression on Facebook, connecting with others within, and capturing the attention of the world.[11]

While technologies today seem a tool for the oppression of expression, Tufekci notes the importance of social media during the Arab Spring in changing how people could connect to foster a 'networked public sphere' that enabled public mobilization to defend human rights. From forming the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page to mobilizing the Tahrir Square protests, the emergence of new technologies and the growing prevalence of social media created a new, and open, public sphere, facilitating social movements. Drawing on the definition of Jürgen Habermas, a public sphere is "a people gathered together as a public, articulating the needs of society with the state."[12] As its dynamics "are intertwined with power relations, social structures, institutions, and technologies," Tufecki argues the emergence of social media created a new 'networked public sphere,' including "publics, online and offline, all intertwined, multiple, connected, and complex, but also transnational and global."[13] Unlike public

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest,* 231.

[11] Wolman, "The Digital Road to Egypt's Revolution."

[12] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest,* 5.

[13] Ibid, 6

spheres of the past where barriers intrinsic to identity determined one's access to squares and coffeehouses, digital technologies enable people to connect with all and anyone "who share similar interests and motivations" rather than just those of common "family, race, and social class." [14] "We Are All Khaled Said" and Tahrir Square demonstrate the 'networked public sphere' in Egypt as like-minded individuals across identities and geographies connected online to coordinate action together, defending their right to expression against Mubarak. Even when "Mubarak cut off internet and cell phone communication," his attempt to undermine the protesters and prevent them from connecting "backfired at all levels," instead encouraging further in-person mobilization and drawing additional attention and global condemnation to the protests.[15] As social movements are "attempts to intervene in the public sphere through collective, coordinated action," Tahrir Square's apparent autocratic immunity exemplified the perceived power of technologies in fortifying connections necessary to challenge Mubarak's power in society.[16] The "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page and the Tahrir Square protests reveal how technologies enabled activists to intervene and open a public sphere previously "closed, controlled, characterized by censorship, and ruled by fear."[17] Protest and mobilization were impossible because "people feared talking about politics," and therefore could never unite through beliefs they didn't know they shared.[18] Social media opened new channels for the public to express their discontent outside of limiting Egypt's "extensive control and censorship of the mass media."[19] No longer was the public sphere closed by fear, as Facebook friends could exchange opinions and information freely. In addition to undermining restrictions in connecting, the 'networked public sphere' upheld freedom of expression in its Tahrir Square coordination, since its national and international numbers prevented Mubarak's attempts at censorship during the protests. Connecting through Facebook, people discovered activist communities and empowered themselves, culminating in the Arab Spring Tahrir Square protests. In ousting the autocratic Mubarak, the Arab Spring projected hope for human rights and the freedom of expression within a digitally

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[14] Ibid, 10
[15] Ibid, 226.
[16] Ibid, 8.
[17] Ibid, 13.
[18] Ibid, 13.
[19] Ibid, 13.

networked world. Technology seemed to empower the public to enact social change against oppressive leadership—and social media was the silver bullet.

III. Today: Blocking Human Rights (Watch)

Given the technological optimism in the wake of the Arab Spring, it seemed impossible to imagine that only a few years later Egypt's public sphere would be yet again closed and its public expression restricted. Despite hopes that the Internet's wider access would prevent infringement on the right to expression, Egypt reasserted control of the public sphere and media—and through technological means. Egypt uses technology to control information available to the public, limiting access to and delegitimizing sources while overflowing channels and legitimizing (false) state claims. In 2017, the Egyptian government asserted harsh restrictions on expression through blocking websites, including the Human Rights Watch in an attempt to conceal information from the public. In their report "We Do Unreasonable Things Here," Human Rights Watch exposed Egypt's human rights violations of "widespread arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture against perceived dissidents, many of them alleged members or sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood."[20] The language of 'perceived' and 'alleged' points towards the government's tactics of using false claims to authorize restricting freedom of expression through silencing dissenters. Beyond concealing the report, Egyptian authorities contradicted the Human Rights Watch claim, disputing the violations not as systematic but as "isolated crimes by bad officers acting alone."[21] However, according to the Egyptian non-profit organization the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), Egypt codified its information control through the 2018 Press and Media Regulation Law No. 180, legitimizing its authority to block websites on fictional pretenses, such as ambiguous violations of the 'Supreme Council for Media Regulation' (SCMR).[22] In blocking over 558 websites, SCMR not only "impoverishes the media content and directs it in specific tracts that convey a single voice and narrative," but perpetuates public doubt by

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[20] "We Do Unreasonable Things Here," *Human Rights Watch*, September 5, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/09/06/we-do-unreasonable-things-here/torture-and-national-security-al-sisis-egypt.

[21] "Egypt Blocks Human Rights Watch Website Amid Widespread Media Blockade."

[22] "Restrictions On Media Freedom," *Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE)*, September 26, 2023, https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2023/09/26/35509-afteegypt.html.

accusing these sites of producing 'fake news.'[23] In the case of blocking *Mada Masr*, an independent liberal newspaper in Egypt, Egyptian authorities falsely "alleged the platform was founded by the Muslim Brotherhood with the purpose of 'spreading false news.'"[24] Not only could they not easily access *Mada Masr*, but then the public doubted the legitimacy of its content since the government narrative challenged the newspaper's authenticity, raising the question: Was *Mada Masr* producing fake news as the government claimed, or was Egypt's claim that *Mada Masr* produced fake news...fake news? Such was the case blocking the Human Rights Watch website—not only did Egyptian authorities restrict the public's access to information regarding human rights, but questioned the legitimacy and accuracy of the information the international human rights organization produced.

Beyond blocking websites in violation, SCMR is also empowered to persecute the individuals creating this alleged false content to "target journalists for carrying out their work" and "detain [them] on publishing-related charges over the past years."[25] Like the case for blocking websites, the Egyptian government often accused journalists and activists of fictitious charges, including allegations of "joining a terrorist group" or "publishing false news."[26] Increasing modes of surveillance further deters activists from not just organizing another Tahrir Square, but smaller strategies of mobilization such as even affiliating online with Human Rights Watch. Beyond hacking or social media monitoring, Egypt is undergoing construction of 'The Capital Egypt,' a smart city pitching its provided benefits of increased safety, reduced traffic, and lower costs.[27] The city houses a camera network with "sophisticated video analytics to monitor crowds and traffic congestion, detect incidents of theft, observe suspicious people or objects, and trigger automated alarms in emergency situations."[28] However, underlying these conveyed social benefits, these live feeds are accessible to government officials. These increasing modes of surveillance further jeopardize Egyptians' rights. If the Egyptian

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Nourhan Fahmy, "How the Egyptian State Codifies Media Censorship," *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, December 9, 2019, https://timep.org/2019/12/09/how-the-egyptian-state-codifies-media-censorship/.

[25] "Restrictions on Media Freedom."

[26] Fahmy, "How the Egyptian State Codifies Media Censorship."

[27] "The Capital Egypt," *Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD)*, 2017, http://www.acud.eg/.

[28] "Cctv Cameras Will Watch Over Egyptians in New High-Tech Capital," *Reuters*, January 4, 2023. https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N33I0DO/#:~:text=In%20the%20New%20Administrative%20Capital,of%20its%206.5%20million%20residents.

government can identify them and track their every movement, activists will "never find the courage to act if [they are] certain of being exposed, and journalists might be prevented from investigating government wrongdoing."[29] Through these surveillance mechanisms, states can use "these capabilities against activists and dissidents," creating a public sphere of fear and limiting their human rights.[30] Dashing hopes that the Internet would fuel democracy, modern applications of technology limit freedom and social mobilization. In contrast to technologies during the Arab Spring, today's Egypt no longer hosts an open public sphere where activists can access information, connect with others, and socially mobilize. Through infecting the public sphere with disinformation and distrust, today's Egypt represents a closed public sphere entrenched in fear and confusion, where citizens are limited in the information they can access, knowledge of its legitimacy, and ability to express their beliefs without persecution under charges rooted in falsity.

IV. Privatized Platform Architecture: Mubarak to Media Autocracy

While social media remains present from 2011 Tahrir Square to today, Egypt's transformation reflects a new architecture of technology, and thus a public sphere. Through determining "our ability to preserve and circulate ideas and stories, the ways in which we connect and converse, the people with whom we can interact, the things that we can see, and the structures of power that oversee the means of contact," architecture informs the public sphere and abilities to practice human rights within it.[31] Like "cities, which bring together large numbers of people in concentrated areas," and "coffeehouses and salons, that…alter architectures of interaction and visibility," Tufecki argues that new technologies like "online platforms have architectures just as our cities, roads, and buildings do, and those architectures affect how we navigate them."[32] Since the Arab Spring, the architectures of online platforms have changed under the influence of private platforms and their growing user base. Contrary to the perceived inclusivity and accessibility during the Arab Spring, today's "networked public sphere largely shifted to commercial spaces," suggesting a new architecture affecting platform navigation and use.[33]

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[29] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, 251.
[30] Ibid, 251.
[31] Ibid, 5.
[32] Ibid, 11.
[33] Ibid, 147.

While the "We Are All Khaled Said" page played an incremental role in the Arab Spring, the Facebook page has since exemplified the limits of expression under private platform policy, as in 2010 "Facebook deactivated the page because the account holder, Wael Ghonim, had used a pseudonym," failing to comply with the platform's 'real-name' policy.[34] As Ghonim was removed and his expression restricted for violating a platform policy, expression is determined, and limited, by private policies and practices. The public sphere is now controlled by private architectures, which "neither shopping malls nor Facebook nor any other private company guarantees freedom of speech or privacy."[35] This transition means that expression and "access to the public sphere is enacted through internet platforms' policies, algorithms, and affordances."[36] Not only do they not necessarily prioritize protecting human rights, but according to Shoshana Zuboff, platforms actively seek to undermine them within a "pursuit of lawlessness and in the absence of the typical mechanisms...governance."[37] As "Google and Facebook vigorously lobby to kill online privacy protection, limit regulations, weaken or block privacy-enhancing legislation, and thwart every attempt to circumscribe their practices," Zuboff argues private platform "power produces specific contests over the constitutionally established rights of citizens." [38] The platform architecture that emerged since the Arab Spring influences expression by impacting the content seen or concealed. The algorithm, users, and developers determine expression, as black-box algorithms spread or bury content and connections; users can perpetuate disinformation to censor and remove their opponents; and capitalist developers manipulate behavior to gain profits at the expense of user expression and trust.

i) Algorithmic Obstruction: What's Hidden in the Black Box?

As part of their privatized practices determining human rights, platforms use recommendation algorithms to determine feeds, suggest Friends, and display certain information. Platforms maintain these algorithms in secrecy, maintaining a 'black box' to retain their competitive edge as to how the platform functions. Contrary to former technologies, new algorithmic architecture "differs from those of earlier forms of mass

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[34] Ibid, 153.
[35] Ibid, 150.
[36] Ibid, 147.
[37] Zuboff, "'We Make Them Dance,'" 33.
[38] Ibid, 33-34.

media" given its power to "filter, censor, and promote" content across platforms.[39] Given the lack of transparency in concealing the algorithm's nature, the black box contributes to the lawless Wild West of private platforms, exempt from scrutiny. In determining the people and content users are exposed to, algorithms control the content, either causing "widespread visibility and burial of content" within the black box.[40] One way content becomes available or hidden is through amplification when users are herded together based on detected similarities in their behavior. Recommendation systems employ machine learning to learn through reinforcement, fortifying recurring connections to repeat the behavior. As observed by Cadwalladr during her Google queries, this architecture creates "an amplification of the message" and content.[41] As "more people who search for information…see links…and click on those links," consequently, "the more traffic the sites will get, the more links they will accrue and the more authoritative they will appear," creating a vicious cycle strengthening certain information channels.[42]

This structure bears implications for the proliferation of information and the formation of groups. Predicated on measures of user 'engagement,' recommendation systems lead people down a rabbit hole of extremism, feeding them increasingly extreme versions of their original interest so that they are exposed to different content chosen by the algorithm rather than themselves. In artificially clustering users through algorithm recommendations, people may be predisposed to extreme content and grow more likely to find themselves in certain groups than others. Like Cadwallader's Google findings that Jews, women, and Muslims are evil, this architecture becomes problematic when the highly trafficked information pushes one prejudiced message. By 'herding' the public to certain information and groups, the algorithm perpetuates and legitimizes information that can be false or extreme, simply by burying content the algorithm deems 'low engagement' and pushing content with 'high engagement.' However, this creates a vicious cycle as once content receives 'high engagement' status, it continues to be spread, and its engagement further increases. While during the Arab Spring, groups coalesced based on their shared interest in upholding their rights against

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[39] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, 151.
[40] Ibid, 165.
[41] Carole Cadwalladr, "Google, Democracy, And The Truth About Internet Search," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/04/google-democracy-truth-internet-search-facebook.
[42] Ibid.

Mubarak, today, groups are predetermined by the content Facebook and Google platforms show users, decided through algorithms that amplify certain messages and restrict expression by burying less popular postings. In concealing some messages and influencing the formation of groups, recommendation algorithms limit the right to expression as users are limited in sharing information.

ii) More Users, More Problems: Censoring by Disinformation

In addition to policies controlling whether "significant and important stories can be silenced by a terms-of-service complaint or by an algorithm," users influence expression on platforms by hiding their opponents and spreading their views, even if rooted in falsehoods.[43] Especially given the nature of recommendation algorithms to amplify or bury content based on user engagement, the increase of platform users and surplus of available information online further enables burying content and can be employed by malicious users to drown others in disinformation, creating confusion and curbing the right to expression. When Wael Ghonin created "We Are All Khaled Said" in 2011, Facebook had half a billion users *total*. Today, Facebook has more than three billion users, increasing six times over ten years. With more users, the platform houses more information, which accelerates the recommendation algorithm's process of amplification to bury information. With this information surplus, malicious actors can take advantage of this rapid virality, infecting platforms with misinformation to limit their opponents' visibility and effectively censoring their expression.

While failing to censor the public during the Arab Spring, the Egyptian government has since learned to use platform algorithms and architecture to control content today. Tufekci theorizes that through *censorship by disinformation,* regimes overwhelm the public with contradictory information and confuse them to the point they cannot act. In contrast to pre-Arab Spring censorship characterized "as a total denial of access," Tufecki suggests that present-day censorship practices function "as a denial of attention, focus, and credibility."[44] For example, in blocking Human Rights Watch for arbitrary reasons, Egypt both manipulated the information publicly available and sowed doubt on Human Rights Watch's legitimacy. Creating confusion by perpetuating misinformation and invalidating sources, Egypt exemplifies the goal of disinformation to "overwhelm people with so many pieces of bad and disturbing

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[43] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, 173.
[44] Ibid, 229.

information that they become confused and give up trying to figure out what the truth might be—or even the possibility of finding out what is true."[45] Amidst confusion as to what is true or false, this "doubt leads to inaction that perpetuates the status quo," impeding social mobilization.[46] As "the loss of credibility, spread of confusion, in action and withdrawal from the issue by ordinary people, [deprive] movements of energy," the public sphere falls into a state of paralysis, where coordination and change feel impossible.[47] As evident through the AFTE's reports, Egypt achieves censorship today by controlling the narrative online—saturating the public sphere with the sources it condones and discrediting all others. This violates freedom of expression since people do not have access to information nor the ability to express themselves online, while the state overwhelms the media with its statements and legitimizes its suppression of contrary sources through its false claims.

In addition to concealing content by burying it in misinformation, users can censor platforms by removing content they disagree with through community policing, reporting opponents for (false) policy violations. According to Tufekci, "spam has now become a verb," meaning "mass reporting of opponents as spam or abusive... [to get] accounts suspended temporarily or even permanently."[48] If reported "for infractions, real or imagined," users can take advantage of the platform architecture to limit others and information access.[49] In addition to propagating misinformation, actors can censor others through false charges, removing them from the online public sphere akin to removing them from the physical public sphere through arresting or torturing dissidents on false charges. Like journalists jailed under made-up charges of terrorism, online opponents can be removed from fabricated reports of platform policy violations. Contrary to facilitating connection and information access a decade ago, the post-Arab Spring platform architecture enables users to corrupt platforms by spreading falsehoods to both toxicate the platform with misinformation and unjustly remove opposition, transforming what users see and who users interact with, and imposing a regime of censorship by disinformation that restricts human rights.

iii) Direct Manipulation: Surveillance Capitalism

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[45] Ibid, 241.
[46] Ibid, 250.
[47] Ibid, 250.
[48] Ibid, 156.
[49] Ibid, 156.

Contrary to their perceived activist role during the Arab Spring, users play a different role within the new platform architecture: the commodity. Privatized platform architecture indirectly facilitates black box algorithms and malicious users to influence the accessible information, but a final actor, the platform's capitalist developers, intentionally manipulates user behavior and expression through surveillance capital practices. According to Zuboff, platforms control behavior by "inserting a specific phrase into your Facebook news feed, timing the appearance of a BUY button on your phone with the rise of your endorphins at the end of a run, shutting down your car engine when an insurance payment is late, or employing population-scale behavioral microtargeting drawn from Facebook profiles."[50] These tactics influence how users feel, think, and act. "Via emotional contagion" spreading specific sentiments, Facebook leads "people to experience the same emotions without their awareness."[51] Additionally, even in technologies as seemingly innocent as Pokemon Go, "players are herded to eat, drink, and purchase in the restaurants, bars, fast-food joints, and shops that pay to play," their decisions about where to go and who they meet are influenced by the platform.[52] Platforms "shape [user] behavior according to their interests," which are to profit through advertising and platform growth.[53] These goals are achieved through a vicious cycle of behavior manipulation, as platforms "profile their users so that the ads they display are worth something, which in turn…they have even more resources and data on users as more and more people join them because that is where most of their friends are," and more user data that can be surveyed and sold to continue growing users, advertising, and profits.[54] "To increase the price they are paid for ads," platforms "create tailored ads that target particular users who are likely to buy specific products" and collect user information to profile and direct certain information to them to manipulate them.[55] Building on this incentive of platforms to collect user data to increase profits, Zuboff introduces her theory of *surveillance capitalism*, that platforms' "wealth is largely derived from surveillance—specifically, the unilateral dispossession of human experience for the sake of others' profit."[56] In this way, platforms target "people individually to recruit them to an idea"

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[50] Zuboff, "We Make Them Dance," 18.

[51] Ibid, 20.

[52] Ibid, 20.

[53] Ibid, 19.

[54] Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, 149.

[55] Ibid, 149.

[56] Ibid, 7.

and direct their attention to where the platforms, not users, benefit.[57] Further, users are unaware of what private information is being collected. In the article "Private Traits and Attributes Are Predictable from Digital Records of Human Behavior," the authors reveal how Facebook Likes alone inform the platform of "data that are actually recorded and information that can be statistically predicted from such records."[58] Beyond what users explicitly input and volunteer, platforms can use their web behavior to accurately predict other personal information, such as using Facebook Likes to learn their race, child of separation, and even personality.

Such surveillance capitalism has major consequences on the freedom of expression, limiting the freedom of users to express themselves, further exacerbated by creating a mistrust of the platform and its transparency. Like the proliferation of disinformation enabling Tufecki's censorship disinformation, surveillance capitalism creates a public distrust of media, where the content seen cannot be trusted as true or representative of reality rather than just a market ploy. Like the mysterious recommendations of the black box algorithm, this collection and behavioral intervention are hidden by platforms, deepening a lack of transparency and deeming platforms untrustworthy. Users are not free to express themselves on the platforms, as the platform commodifies what is shared and can use this information to identify user characteristics and personal information, fostering further distrust and discouraging expression. Rather than promoting the interests of the people, Zuboff argues that this privatized architecture upholding surveillance capitalist power is "a profoundly antidemocratic constellation."[59] In place of institutions protecting the public, "market operations fill the void," shrouding the public sphere in disarray and anarchical chaos.[60] Contrary to expectations following the Arab Spring of platforms as open spaces free to express dissent when physical spaces were closed, today's privatized platform architecture, emerging as a result of platform incentives to gain users and capital, restricts the right to expression through black box algorithms spreading or burying content; malicious users perpetuating disinformation to censor and remove their opponents from the space; and developers manipulating behavior to gain profits at the

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[57] Cadwalladr, "Google, Democracy, and the Truth about Internet Search," 2016.

[58] Michal Kosinski, David Stillwell, Thore Graepel, "Private Traits And Attributes Are Predictable From Digital Records Of Human Behavior," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110, no. 15 (2013): 5802, doi:10.1073/pnas.1218772110.

[59] Zuboff, "We Make Them Dance," 40.

[60] Ibid, 40.

expense of user expression and trust. Rather than serving as a force of public empowerment, today's privatized platforms defy such aspirations of technology, as this new architecture restricts expression. Contrary to the Arab Spring's open and inclusive public sphere, the privatized platform architecture restricts connecting, sharing information, and gaining attention to limit dissent, mobilization, and expression in the platform's public sphere.

V. Conclusion: Good, Bad, and Ugly of Technology

In a short span of only a few years, the usages of technology seemed to transform from facilitating expression during the Arab Spring to impeding it through SCMR censorship and The Capital Egypt today. However, beyond questions of technology as 'good' during the Arab Spring versus 'bad' today, the transformation of platform spaces represents a historical contingency in the ways different architectures determine how technologies facilitate or impede rights and the public sphere. Like coffeehouses changed the architecture of society and the space in which people interact, Facebook of 2011 introduced a new technological architecture to navigate the public sphere—and in its wake, Facebook of today also introduced a new technological architecture to navigate the public sphere. The jarring contrast between social media in Tahrir Square and today represents such a change in architecture towards privatization and capitalism, reliant on secret black box algorithms to conceal or spread content, subjected to malicious users censoring the spaces through drowning or removing dissenters in disinformation, and incentivized by profits to commodify and manipulate users. Blaming problems on technology conceals the true underlying source of social issues and human rights violations. As Zuboff argues, "it is capitalism that assigns the price tag of subjugation and helplessness, not the technology."[61] Technologies did not create the lawlessness of the private sector today—rather, they merely provide a lens to examine these pre-existing problems in society. As technologies evolve and the public sphere adopts new architectures, human rights must keep up. With a platform structure designed to restrict them, a new human 'digital rights' era is needed to uphold the rights to expression in the face of these challenges. As the transition from the Arab Spring to today reveals, technological architectures can change a lot in a little time. Perhaps, to achieve such aspirations of technology empowering the public, another technological architecture is in order—one designed around protecting expression.

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[61] Ibid, 8.