9 Communication Studies in Transformation — Self-Reflections on an Evolving Discipline in Times of Change

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Monday morning: You wake to the alarm clock set on your mobile phone. You get up to check the news posted by your overseas friends on Facebook before watching the latest world news on TV. On the way to work, you quickly use WhatsApp to tell your friend that you cannot make the meeting scheduled for that night, then read your local newspaper app on your tablet.

These daily actions describe ordinary media usage on an average day, and hint at the sweeping changes we have witnessed in our media use. Over the course of recent years, rapid developments in media technology have substantially changed our communication practices, and indeed are changing them still. Most likely, we continue to take actions fundamentally similar to those of generations before us — waking up, reading newspapers, connecting with friends — but we do these things in a different way, influenced by new technologies. This process is what communication scholars have termed *mediatization*, a term that refers to the incorporation of all kinds of new-media technologies into quotidian practices (Hepp & Krotz 2014).

The phenomenon of mediatization is taking place on a global scale and has been felt in every society. In particular, it has greatly facilitated the transnational transfer of concepts, products and content.[1] Hence, since the beginning of the digital era in the 1990 s, and even more so since the advent of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000 s, communication studies have started to shift their focus from the mass consumption of media to individualized forms of media production and use. However, mainstream studies on mediatization published in the leading journals in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany have often eschewed dealing with political

1 For a perspective of computer sciences on this phenomenon, see the contribution by Tobias Amft and Kalman Graffi in this volume.

content to an odd degree, as if the rise of new media had stripped the public of its political interests. Over the past decade, the majority of studies published have addressed issues such as how American college students share music files and cute cat pictures via social media, how women utilize cameras on their smartphones, or how school life is changing through mediatized day-to-day activities (e.g., Pettegrew & Day 2015; Hjorth 2014; Hepp & Krotz 2014). Moreover, communication studies in the area of new media have long concentrated heavily on researching "developed" societies in the northern hemisphere, such as Europe, North America, South Korea or Japan.

On the other hand, research on internet communication focusing on China, Africa and the Middle East over the past decade has often brought the political dimension to the forefront. In this case, the research has explored authoritarian regimes' regulation of the media, media usage by protest groups, exile-run media and so on. Communication studies have thus seemed to divide the mediatized world into quotidian practices in the "West" and political effects in the "rest".[2] It is interesting to observe how these two theoretical strands, which address the same global phenomenon, that is, mediatization, have shaped the development of communication studies in recent years. In particular, a rather techno-deterministic approach is evident that has reduced the countries of the "rest" to the status of receivers of Western technology yearning for freedom; at the same time, this discourse has essentialized the "West" as a homogeneous entity — which it certainly is not.

However, a review of the research findings produced within communication studies on media change and the transformation of communication seven years after the Arab uprisings reveals interesting developments. The previous period's wave of techno-deterministic euphoria has been countered by more cautious evaluations of media effects and interventions from social scientists hailing from different disciplines. In the following sections, we lay out the rationales behind these two different approaches by referring to mainstream communication studies literature of the last decade, as well as to our own work in the field, in which we have combined theories and models developed in the West with case studies examining Arab societies. Subsequently, we ask whether scholars located in the

2 Here we borrowed a phrase from Stuart Hall, who pointed out the academic world's construction of "the West and the Rest" with regard to power relations in 1992.

Arab world can contribute to a reorientation within the field of communication studies and, if so, how they can achieve this. We conclude by stating that the Arab uprisings have indeed provided a major catalyst for rethinking the impact of media on political and social change within the field of communication studies.

The Arab world in focus

As Egyptian sociologist Mona Abaza argues, the Arab uprisings "have revived academic interest in the region in a clearly positive manner" (Abaza 2011). The events have raised scholarly awareness of the role of media and its connection to social and political change in a region that has long lacked such attention. However, with this attention, predefined concepts and externally imposed theories have also gained ground. Moreover, in shifting their research interests quickly, many media scholars have also become what Abaza terms "overnight Middle East experts". Scholars referred to the events in the Arab countries as long as they seemed to support particular approaches favored by academics, but stopped doing so as soon as their concepts proved no longer able to encompass the complexities of the interactions between the region's media, society and processes of transformation.

Iran's 2009 Green movement was the first event to stimulate communication scholars' research into the role of social media in political upheavals (Kamalipour 2010). Indeed, it seemed to be a wake-up call demanding closer scholarly attention to the political potential of social media. Later, the obvious role played by social media in the Arab uprisings significantly boosted research on media effects in communication studies. After 2011, the investigation of the role of communication within social networks and in the use of digital media more broadly became a focal point of research in relation to the Arab world. When some Egyptians went so far as to name newborn children "Facebook",[3] with many others exuberantly thanking social media, there was clearly something extraordinary going on.

3 See CNN, February 21, 2011, available on http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/02/21/egypt.child.facebook/.

With the aim of assessing the type of knowledge relating to the Arab uprisings actually produced by communication scholars, we analyzed all journal title entries in the time span from 2011 to early 2015 in the Web of Science Core Collection — thus, looking only at journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Globally, this collection includes the most influential communication studies journals. Using the topical Boolean search terms "Arab spring OR Arab* OR Egypt OR Tunisia OR Libya OR Syria," we identified 148 original articles that referred to the media in the Arab world. Only 66 of the 148 articles actually dealt with an Arab country or local social phenomena; the majority of the articles (83) simply referred to the "Arab Spring" as a marker, symbol or cultural concept, while in fact investigating different topics such as Facebook use by young people in South Africa or the Occupy Wall Street movement. Often, the term "Arab Spring" acts as a specific imagined construct that is transported and reproduced in these research settings, leaving little room for investigation of the complex and structural factors behind the actual uprisings and the role of (social) media in them. Although the most simplistic causal explanations for the so-called Facebook revolution have today been strongly questioned by most researchers, the argument that the revolution was triggered by specific communication tools such as Twitter and Facebook continues to be accepted uncritically and reproduced through decontextualized references to the "Arab Spring" in cases when writers seek to highlight the political effects of the media. There has been little robust debate between those propounding a euphoric determinism for social media effects (most of whom can be found in the field of communication studies) and those (typically found in area studies) who are more suspicious of notions of social determinism and political economy (Badr 2015). The evident disconnect between communication studies and area studies, with some exceptions, helps explain the prevalence of this decontextualized reference to the "Arab Spring" in communication studies.

Of the remaining 66 articles which investigate the Arab media in depth, an overwhelming majority of 52 papers — or 79 percent — focus on information and communication technology (ICT) and new media, while only 14 — or 21 percent of the relevant literature — discuss other aspects of Arab media. This demonstrates how communication studies follow fashionable trends and immediately appealing catchwords. Recent research focusing on the Arab world in particular seems to be obsessed with ICT, neglecting the fact that television remains by far the most widely used medium in the Arab world, reaching almost every household (Dubai Press

Club 2010). Even in Egypt, the most populous Arab country and one with a relatively advanced technical infrastructure, internet penetration had not exceeded 25 percent of the population in 2011, and rose after the events of the Arab uprisings only to about 32 percent in 2014.[4] In other countries, such as Syria, Libya or Yemen, which also witnessed uprisings, internet penetration rates were and remain far lower.

The return of the school of "massive effects"

In light of these imbalances, how can we explain the limited focus of the published communication studies research? One part of the explanation seems to be the scholarly uncertainty regarding how to grasp the new and developing phenomenon of mediatization. Indeed, all established explanations seem to be outdated. Danish scholar Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, for example, has summarized the debate over the subfield of political communication and its failed adaptation to what he termed "sociotechnological changes" (Nielsen 2014: 7). He criticizes the inability of communication studies to adapt to new circumstances that were evident even before the Arab uprisings, and which have largely been shaped by the worldwide explosion in internet use. The mediatization of nearly all aspects of life, accelerated by the increasing interactivity of internet functions — also known as Web 2.0 — certainly brought huge challenges for communication studies. Nielsen (2014: 6) describes, for example, how audiences are fragmenting (or perhaps can no longer even be described as audiences, since they produce content at the same time they consume it), how media organizations are changing, and how processes of individualization are taking place. Under these circumstances, he further argues, relying on what he calls "zombie concepts" — concepts such as agenda-setting or public opinion, or a focus on what the media do with people instead of what people do with the media — might put communication studies on the wrong track, thus rendering the discipline irrelevant at the very least.

Over the last decade, there has been growing sentiment among scholars that traditional US-inspired communication studies approaches, with their focus on media effects, might be missing the point of current develop-

4 According to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) statistics: http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2015/Individuals_Internet_2000-2014.xls.

ments (Lynch 2008). The result has been a steady growth in research borrowing from other social science disciplines, such as media analysis derived from cultural studies, or critical media studies inspired by the Frankfurt School (Punathambekar & Scannell 2013). Interestingly, however, the Arab uprisings have accelerated this shift, while at the same time reviving the almost-forgotten paradigms of modernization and technological determinism — paradigms that seemed to offer convenient explanations for complex realities because they had a long tradition in communication studies — despite the fact that these approaches have largely been discredited. As in the 1960 s, "massive effects" allegedly produced by the media are today being overemphasized, with researchers attributing new media with an overly influential role in triggering changes in human behavior, as well as in political and social structures. Marc Lynch diagnosed this trend before the uprisings, and concluded that, "as in the earlier generation of Western media-effects research, the absence of serious empirical research and undertheoretized causal mechanisms allow a politically convenient and superficially plausible 'massive effects' assumption to go largely unchallenged" (Lynch 2008: 18). This can be explained by a colonial legacy that shaped assumptions about the "rest", which was initially hidden behind benevolent rhetoric but which became clearer through the subsequent reliance on explanations citing the triumphant advance of Western technology in the Arab world. Indeed, this trend became clearly visible in media reports and academia during the Arab uprisings. In one of his TV interviews, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg even explained why social media platforms were so important to the entire world: "Here we use things like Facebook to share news and catch up with our friends, but there — they're gonna use it to decide what kind of government they want, to get access to health care for the first time ever, to connect with family hundreds of miles away that they haven't seen in decades. Getting access to the internet is a really big deal!"[5] Interestingly, he seemed to forget that "here" (in the United States) too, social media is used in political communication; indeed, political and societal changes are accelerated by particular patterns of media practice. Moreover, most of the people "there" (in the non-Western world) also use Facebook and other social media for entertainment and personal purposes, sharing information about football,

5 Mark Zuckerberg on CNN, August 21, 2013, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8N3wGjiPYg.

music and cute cats just like their Western counterparts (Wheeler 2005; Braune 2013).

The demystification of media technology has often been neglected by scholars. Larry Diamond, a well-known political scientist, coined the term "liberation technology", which he defines as "any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social and economic freedom" (Diamond 2010: 70). Similarly, the idea of having found a tool able to facilitate democratization processes has guided a considerable bulk of scholarly literature since 2011, particularly among publications dealing with the Arab uprisings. Badr (2015: 2–4) summarizes the main arguments in this strand of literature. In particular, she identifies a revival of the normative concept of a Habermasian public sphere. After having been widely discussed in Germany for 20 years, the concept of the public sphere appeared prominently in Anglo-Saxon scholarship only after Habermas' book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was translated into English in 1989. With the importance of social media in the Arab uprisings, the concept of the public sphere and its potential expansion due to technological innovation experienced a second revival. The dominant hypothesis here is that online media opened up an otherwise repressive and controlled public sphere. Specifically, the internet is seen as fertile ground for contestation mechanisms, where political and social actors can engage with one another to express contrasting and divergent views, thus forming counter-publics. This again, so the argument goes, facilitates inter-media agenda setting, that is, a spillover of themes from internet sources into the broader public: "Social media, therefore, break the monopoly of traditional elites and successfully put neglected topics on the media agenda" (Badr 2015: 3). It was hoped that these possibilities facilitated by technology would lead to newly empowered citizenry.

Challenging concepts

Beyond our review of the major communication studies journals, other perspectives in recent years have also sought to bear witness to the processes of social and political change in the Arab world, in China or Russia, and even in the West following events such as the NSA surveillance scandal. In contrast to what has been called the "utopian" perspective of social media effects, a "dystopian" counter-discourse has arisen. One of its most prominent proponents is Evgeny Morozov. He argues that digital media

have primarily helped authoritarian institutions such as regime elites to find new and more effective ways of controlling and repressing their people (Morozov 2011). Developments in the Arab countries and elsewhere show that the internet also harbors the potential for information manipulation and government surveillance, and does not necessarily function as a liberation technology, as optimistically presumed (Badr 2015).

Similarly, other scholars explicitly referred to the Arab uprisings to indicate that the power of social media effects had been overestimated. Lynch (2013) spoke of a "Twitter devolution" and a "Tahrir bubble". If we embed this insight into a broader global context, the "normalization thesis" comes into play. According to this thesis, normalization processes happen through commercialization mechanisms, citizens' behavior and the procedures by which actors such as the state acquire new skills, thereby transferring offline power constellations to the online sphere (Anstead & Chadwick 2009). The innovation therefore becomes normalized.

The naïve expectation that the internet will become a platform for rational deliberation and idealistic inclusion needs to be viewed through this perspective. The current debate among European journalists on dealing with the flood of hate speech in online comment sections clearly illustrates how far online deliberations are from being rational or inclusive; on the contrary, they foster the growth of radical polarized positions within the political culture. South of the Mediterranean, in Egypt, we witnessed the emergence of Facebook as a real "battleground", pitting followers of different political positions against one another (Badr 2013). Thus, while a highly optimistic depiction of technology prevailed in communication studies shortly after the Arab uprisings, more nuanced perspectives on (social) media and its contexts emerged later, seeking to expand the understanding of the role of the media in social and political change beyond this initial techno-deterministic view. This development has relied on general shifts in the field of communication studies, which started with the advent of the internet but gained a new dynamism with the uprisings of 2011. To be sure, however, different approaches within communication studies — postcolonial vs. modernist, normative vs. descriptive, and quantitative vs. qualitative — all continue to coexist, each finding self-serving evidence in the Arab uprisings to legitimize their own findings.

Arab inroads?

In the early 2000 s, various scholars at US universities — often those from an immigrant background — began pushing back against the blind application of Western theories in globalization research. As a part of this effort, they started a debate regarding the de-Westernization of media and communication studies (Curran & Park 2000). Since that time, the question of how "different conceptions about knowledge, humanity, identity, individualism and community" could help to "produce legitimate" knowledge about societies under investigation (Waisbord & Mellado 2014: 366) has come to the fore. In this light, our own questions in the context of the de-Westernization debate can be summarized as follows: Did the uprisings bring more attention to specifically Arab academic contributions to mainstream communication studies? And how can significant local inroads into communication studies be made possible?

To answer these questions, we investigated the background of the authors of the 66 journal articles mentioned above. Indeed, about a third were written by scholars with Arab names. However, most of those scholars were located abroad, and affiliated with US or British universities. Only six of the lead authors were actually affiliated with universities in the Arab world, with half of them working at American universities in the region. Previous investigations of knowledge production by Arab social scientists have also indicated that only a negligible number of contributions by local scholars are published in the widely read, high-impact journals. For example, Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanatis analyzed the social sciences' "politics of citation" (2016: 255) within the context of the Arab uprisings, and found an "evident hierarchy […] of knowledge production" (275), with the "highest level of legitimacy (and the highest citation factor)" accorded most commonly to those "from U.S. foreign-policy Ivy Leaguers". Only on the lower level of the hierarchy do they locate "peripheral knowledge producers" that "include Arabs writing from within the region, in Arabic" (2016: 276). We can draw similar conclusions from our investigation into high-impact communication studies journals: Arab media scholars do not participate in process of knowledge production in the field of communication studies unless they publish in English or out-

side their region. Academic knowledge generated in Arabic remains largely unknown and disconnected from international research.[6]

At the same time, it is not clear whether local scholars would have come to different, more independent conclusions, as many of them are either involved in activism, and have thus endorsed the euphoric discourse of new media empowerment, or have been coopted to produce politically biased research. Furthermore, we also have to acknowledge local authors' tendency to refer to well-known Western markers and constructs that capture the readers' attention. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that 54 of the 66 articles analyzed refer explicitly to the "Arab Spring", the "revolution", the "revolt" or the "uprisings" in order to frame their findings. Even if their research took place well before the incidents, authors evidently sought to make their contributions more appealing by stating that what they analyzed "paved the way for the Egyptian revolution of January 2011" (El-Nawawy & Khamis 2014), for example, or referred to the uprisings in Egypt in order to pose the question: "Can Twitter usage promote social progress in Saudi Arabia?" (Chaudhry 2014).

However, as Mohammad Ayish — one of the closest observers of Arab media scholarship — and Harris Breslow have pointed out, the general problem is that the Anglo–American empirical and quantitative mass communication paradigm still dominates in the Arab world (Ayish & Breslow 2014: 59). Similarly, Walter Armbrust (2012: 48) detects a focus on the causal effect of new technology. In her review of audience studies carried out by Arab scholars, Noha Mellor even concludes that "Arab researchers here place themselves in a knowledge hierarchy above the subjects of their research, who are regarded as passive receivers of information, and potential victims of western propaganda" (2013: 212). Ayish and Breslow urge researchers to step back and abandon purely media-centric analysis, and to engage instead in interdisciplinary approaches that link communication research insights and techniques with those of neighboring disciplines. In this regard, Ayish and Breslow suggest three main areas of research interests: 1) the political economy of the media with regard to institutions, governance and information flows; 2) the increasing mobility of information flows and people within the media, and 3) the changing nature of the production of identity with regard to the media (Ayish & Breslow 2014: 57).

6 See the contributions in this volume by Florian Kohstall as well as Barbara Winckler and Christian Junge on a similar discussion on the (in)visibility of local knowledge.

In fact, these recommendations accord with the current focus of critical communication studies in general (Punathambekar & Scannell 2013).

Accordingly, three research strands are needed in Arab media research. First, a more *cultural studies-oriented* approach needs to be developed. In the last decade, this approach has become more prominent, particularly in Great Britain but also in other European countries and the United States. Cultural studies analyze the complex relations of media and people by looking at the interrelatedness of production processes, media use and content. Although this research trend promises to offer better contextualized interpretations of social phenomena, it has not yet garnered numerous followers among local or foreign scholars doing research in the Arab world. There are few examples in Arab communication research departments of critical cultural studies focusing on class, race and gender in relation to the media. Enclaves do exist, but these are primarily in fields oriented toward arts, literature or anthropology. In this context, mediated forms of communication such as graffiti, music or slogans have been analyzed (see Aboubakr 2013). Lebanese–American scholar Marwan Kraidy, for instance, has focused on the "human body as medium in the digital age" (Kraidy 2013: 285), thus emphasizing the interrelatedness of production, usage and content offline and online. Moreover, Tarik Sabry (2011) has come up with an attempt to map "Arab cultural studies", identifying the most prominent media scholars of Arab origin. However, most of the scholars who propel this kind of research are based in the West, living and working in the United States or the United Kingdom. On the one hand, this indicates that concepts from abroad are being transferred to (or even sometimes imposed on) the Arab world. But on the other hand, those diasporic researchers of Arab descent are able to use their own biographies to build necessary geographical bridges, as well as the conceptual bridges between contextualized knowledge and innovative media studies. This potential means that Arab scholars in the West can also produce meaningful explanations regarding mediatization in an Arab context.

The second underrepresented element of communication studies in the Arab region is the *political economy* of the media. Political economy refers to the interrelations between economic processes and specific political circumstances (see Richter & Gräf 2015). The term was coined by Marx in relation to his critique of modes of production in 18th century Europe. It experienced a later conceptual revival within the Frankfurt School founded by Adorno and Horkheimer, and was also adopted by left-wing scholars to criticize neoliberal policies and the deregulation of media re-

forms. In non-democratic countries, mainstream communication researchers subscribed for a long time to the assumption that economic liberalization in the media sector would stimulate democratization. Given the lack of public service logic, the state media simply embodied the hegemony of the ruling class. Pluralism due to competition was envisaged as the main outcome of liberalization (Rozumilovicz 2002). However, the real outcome of the privatization of media markets in most Arab countries has in fact been to increase the influence of the ruling political regimes. Major media outlets such as TV stations were often sold to loyal business elites or simply newly founded by family members of the rulers (Richter & El Difraoui 2015: 12). While this is certainly of local importance, the observation also sheds light on the corporate globalization of the media: Alwaleed bin Talal, a Saudi prince, for example, is not only the owner of the most popular pan-Arab entertainment media conglomerates but is also a major shareholder in Twitter, while Egyptian Coptic billionaire Naguib Sawiris controls most of the telecommunications markets in Africa (Sakr 2013: 2295). To date, important questions regarding the political economy of the Arab media have been taken up only haphazardly by local scholars, while research on the issue has again been shaped by observers from abroad such as Naomi Sakr, Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen and Donatella della Ratta (2015), who recently published on Arab media moguls.

The last aspect of communication research we mention here deals with *methodological questions*. At the beginning of this article, we noted the criticisms of scholars seeking to detect causal relations between media and its effects, and specifically the impact of new media on political and social change. Influenced by political science and social movement research, communication studies have tried to illuminate these interactions using quantitative methods, for instance by measuring which audiences use what media, how often, for what purposes and with what effects. Others studying everyday-life activities related to the media and communication have often neglected to consider the potential of the media or media use to bring about social change, thus remaining simply descriptive in their studies. In general, both strands need to overcome their predefined limits; media use should always be linked to effects, but the assumption of causal mechanisms should be avoided. Therefore, in order to identify dynamics of change, future communication studies need to develop methods and theoretical models for the analysis of communication processes and media practices that avoid today's pitfalls. Challenging mainstream trends in cur-

rent media studies also means shifting the scholarly focus toward underrepresented fields and approaches in the Arab region.

Perspectives

Finally, we conclude with a few words on how communication studies can benefit from knowledge production induced by the Arab uprisings. Our core argument in this article is that we need to focus less on technology and more on people-centered analyses of media practices. One could, for example, investigate how the journalistic profession is being transformed by the use of social media. Here, one could ask how exactly journalists apply social media in gathering news, and what this means for the profession's ethical standards. The notion of citizen journalism is also related; this phenomenon could be analyzed through participatory observation, for example, with the goal of establishing exactly how local communities in Cairo, Baghdad or Berlin utilize various media tools to articulate their political causes and problems.

This demands an approach in which communication researchers actively seek to integrate insights gained from other disciplines. At the same time, other disciplines that have acknowledged media as important spaces of action should be more open to engaging with the knowledge produced in the field of communication studies. In particular, scholars with a local knowledge of the culture and politics of the Arab region can build bridges between area studies and communication studies. The boom in "Arab Spring studies" has been noticeable in various disciplines, but invisible boundaries have evidently prevented core findings from being shared across neighboring social science fields. This needs to change!

Establishing stronger networks of interdisciplinary cooperation to enable better circulation of knowledge can also help in adapting seemingly universal concepts and models more meaningfully to local research phenomena. The account of Susan O'Rourke, a journalism instructor teaching in Oman, is quite telling in this regard. She tells of the difficulty of transferring an undergraduate journalism program from New Zealand to Oman: "Although the view was expressed in New Zealand that […] teaching materials should just 'be taken off the shelf', it quickly became apparent that this would not be possible and that much further contextualization to Omani society would be required", because in communication studies, "a complex interaction of culture, language (both visual and written), theory,

intellectual freedom, creativity, imagination and personal opinion occurs" (O'Rourke 2011: 111). This observation demonstrates that the notion of universal journalistic practice, for example, has its limitations.

The production of more "legitimate" knowledge will also require exchanges during which scholars from different geographical and cultural backgrounds can learn from each other. In fact, one result of the Arab uprisings has been the creation of just such networks in communication studies, as the events showed the need to rely more heavily both on local and transcultural scientific knowledge in order to deepen the field's understanding.[7] This motivated partners around the world to engage more strongly with each other.

Both of the authors of this article are involved in various projects of this kind, one of them being the AREACORE network (www.areacore.org). AREACORE is an acronym for the Arab–European Association of Media and Communication Researchers. The network was founded as the result of an intensive summer school in Berlin in 2013. With funding provided by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), communication scholars from seven Arab countries and Germany were brought together to form an academic network; it has been growing ever since. As of 2016, the network consisted of 11 partner universities in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Oman, Yemen, Qatar, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Germany. In addition to the training courses focusing on adapting media concepts such as investigative journalism and data journalism to regional requirements, AREACORE launched two major projects aimed at producing sustainable knowledge shaped by this process of academic exchange. At the annual Media and Digital Literacy Academy in Beirut (MDLAB) summer school, about 50 students and scholars come together every year to reflect critically on various media artefacts and develop their own media production skills. The second major AREACORE project is an online platform for locally produced audiovisual lectures on media systems in each partner country.[8] This offers a global audience access to authentic knowledge regarding the specific characteristics of the individual societies and their media systems. However, these represent only a few steps on what will be a long road of mutual learning and cooperation between communication and media scholars.

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7 For a similar perspective on the benefits of intercultural cooperations, see the contribution by Sarhan Dhouib in this volume.

8 See http://www.areacore.org/ims.

Conclusion

The major upheavals in the Arab countries certainly posed new questions for and gave new direction to the field of communication studies. While its research agenda opened up to include the Arab countries, technological determinism remained a major component in the interpretation of the events. A decontextualized perspective, focusing only on the media and excluding its interactions with society and politics, failed to provide answers to vital questions regarding the media and transformation. However, the construction of bridges between scholars in and outside the region promises to enrich the discipline, offer it fresh insights and widen the circle of internationally legitimate media studies knowledge.

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