In late 2010, global events began to demonstrate that the unique communication affordances of social media could support and empower marginalized groups. As has occurred with previous revolutions, associated technologies are frequently championed as the impetus for social change, reflecting a technological determinist standpoint on the liberatory potential of Western technology. While technology is clearly instrumental in Internet activism, the core processes at work in these movements are social, not technical. Setting up a blog in Burma, for example, is helpful only if potential contributors dare to post despite fears of arrest. Technology tends to overshadow actions on the ground and, more importantly, enjoys short-lived victories as new methods of surveillance and control emerge. Media outlets and platforms focus on current expansions of the prowess and impact of technology; their attention to painstaking, long-term efforts at economic and political reform usually wanes quickly after a revolutionary moment.

What motivations exist for labeling the Arab uprisings and other demonstrations as determined by social media effects? Foreign Affairs editor Evgeny Morozov answers “by emphasizing the liberating role of the tools and downplaying the role of human agency, such accounts make Americans feel proud of their own contribution to events in the Middle East.” The very appellation “media” in “social media” plays up the role of the technology “and thus overestimates [sic] its . . . importance.” To what extent do Morozov’s claims hold true? Such assertions prompt a deliberate reflection on the definition of publicness, causing us to question if socio/spatial processes during the uprisings have recontextualized the historical public sphere (Figure 1).

Distributed Publics

Of particular interest here is the definition of the public sphere via Jürgen Habermas as a discursive space, comprised of a set of practices separate from the state apparatus, in which individuals can discuss issues of the day in a free and unrestricted way. For Habermas the public sphere is not so much a particular space as a particular form of interaction, one that is present in diverse spaces and institutions. More specifically, it supports a form of argumentation that is universally accessible. A conversation is public not simply because it can be heard and overheard.
by others but because it can be directed at anyone; this constitutes its publicness. While that idealized forum can consist of a town meeting or a discussion in a salon, coffeehouse, or union hall where people are physically present and interact face to face, Habermas also recognized the importance of the print industry—newspapers, pamphlets, and books. These began to exert a powerful influence on political life, as their readership implied the awareness of a participating reading community that could be addressed through print, independent of the state. He visualized this free, unitary, and accessible public sphere as a potential democratic utopia where individuals could discuss national issues and come to common agreement. However, this rise of the public is almost simultaneously undermined by the contradictions and conflicts of public space in the twentieth century. For Habermas, then, although our ideals regarding public space have endured, the current reality does not reflect these ideals. Moreover, today’s democracies are inadequate when measured against their own standards.

The ambiguities and contradictions hinted at by Habermas take on new forms in contemporary discourse, as the term public is applied by scholars to new forms of media, new contexts, and new social practices. Granted that social media platforms contain conflicting tendencies, but have they radically altered the philosophical context of the public sphere? Social media platforms just as easily foreclose any possibility of an online public sphere, because of their relative anonymity, invisibility, and limited access (and thus their restricted audience), as well as their network morphology, which allows for monitoring of communication. These characteristics must be examined if we are to ascertain whether or not the structure of social media tends to close off possibilities or actually opens up new ones.

While social media has demonstrated that it can enable political activism, it has serious deficiencies related to individual privacy. Proprietary social networks, from Facebook to Twitter to Google+, effectively create a privatized public. There exist hidden issues, as all users are aware: The owners of these publics track each correspondence and purchase in order to better understand, analyze, and market their communities’ consumptive practices. Through the routine practice of data mining, analysis, and selling, online forums and actions are increasingly compromised. This demonstrates the impossibility of a privately-held commercial space, whether online or off, functioning as a true public space. For example, a privately-demarcated sidewalk or privately-owned shopping mall may prohibit political discussions or solicitation. Similarly, as long as a social media platform is privately held, it functions in the manner of a shopping mall and not that of a public street. Private ownership impinges in other ways—there is the ever-present possibility that government pressure might cause Facebook to suspend activists’ accounts and group pages used to plan rallies, perhaps for vaguely-specified reasons. Beyond data-mining and monitoring social sites, governments can also shut sites down, as has happened in Egypt, Iran, and China during times of social unrest. Like many countries, Egypt still has con-
Figure 1 Ministry of Social Solidarity, Cairo, Egypt, with damaged banner of former President Hosni Mubarak, 28 January 2011.

Figure 2 Mohandiseen, Cairo, Egyptian citizens take to the streets after Internet services had been effectively terminated. A protester uses a cameraphone to capture the crowd. Photographed 28 January 2011 using a RIM BlackBerry 9700.
tracts with Internet service providers (ISPs) that allow its government to limit Internet access nationally. It can also use its own state-owned service providers to harass and/or identify Internet-based organizers. Such regimes can also use social media for their own purposes, spreading disinformation on covertly-sponsored blogs.10

While their membership is potentially open and accessible to all, social media sites require registration, thereby limiting conversation to fellow members. As sociologist Michael Gardiner argues, “The forming of new publics, as a process of collectivization, can only take place against the background of a new form of privatization, however, that of self and subjectivity.”11 While the criticism of psychological privatization could just as well be levied at print media, the exclusivity of social media is compounded by a technologically-supported interface. On the one hand, social media creates a space that mediates and extends discourse beyond face-to-face interaction. Yet on the other hand, that space is not universally accessible.12 Case in point, about one in nine Egyptians had Internet access in 2009, and only approximately nine percent of that group was on Facebook.13 Although access has increased dramatically, Internet accessibility in Egypt, as in the rest of the world, is limited to those who are literate and can afford it.14 According to a modern conception of a public, any such social exclusion undermines the democratic public sphere. The Internet can be a democratic public sphere only if, first, the critical agents make it so, that is, by utilizing open standards for messaging that constructs the context of communication and if, second, computers or other handheld transmission devices are freely and universally available and secure. At present these conditions still do not exist.

**State Interference and Surveillance**

As mobile technologies present increasingly sophisticated ways to engage with social media platforms, those with access find an acceleration of opportunities for political action and social justice. The ephemerality of a surreptitious counterpublic hidden within Twitter or Facebook, can allow for success partly through the medium’s very ubiquity.15 Nevertheless, such subterfuge, like a Trojan horse, will work only once. While many online sites succeeded in their political objectives because of their unlikely stealth mode, it has not taken long for governments to become more adept at blocking or filtering Internet minority forums and counterpublics.

New agreements sanctioning government surveillance in the United States, England, Australia, and elsewhere were initiated immediately after the Arab Uprisings.16 The critical issue is that there are no legal restrictions yet in place protecting individual privacy, and government monitoring can take place without legal permission. As long as a social media platform is owned by a commercial entity, as with Facebook, Twitter, or Google+, it is open to government surveillance, although organizations may attempt to conceal this information from their members lest they lose personal data to other sites. National governments are not far behind media platforms in
using the same technology to locate dissenters for arrest and imprisonment or to paralyze opposition. Just as employers use social media sites to survey employees, nations watch their citizens’ political activities. By default, the structural configurations of the Internet records everything in the process of converting text, images and videos before they are transmitted and reproduced across the network. That structural capacity makes it possible for intelligence organizations to trace members of online groups and email.17

In response to increased surveillance, dissidents keep finding new ways to mobilize Internet resources to their advantage—Syrian rebels could recently be seen to be constantly creating new outlets for information and organizing news. Dissidents utilize certain web proxies (to bypass surveillance), instant messaging programs (which some argue are more difficult to track), and old-school word of mouth. In other countries witnessing unrest, people use mobile devices to capture video and disseminate it virally. In Syria, however, the government has tapped mobile phones in addition to landlines.18 Those who want to purchase a SIM card must provide information, which the government can use to track these individuals.19 This puts protestors in an increasingly dangerous position, as social media becomes the primary space of organization. Online transmissions of discussions can be traced and therefore are not secure. The digital trail of online information raises the possibility that every action is now potentially traceable—not just by the state but also by anyone able to pay for that information. As a result, many counterpublic sites, most recently in the Middle East, have responded by becoming mobile within the Internet, changing their IP addresses and passing on the new addresses to their members only face to face.

What marked the Arab uprisings, however, as both a case study and a discursive turn in the debate was not necessarily what occurred online but rather what happened when the government of Egypt terminated Internet access for four days in January 2011.20 Believing that limiting Internet and cell phone access would curtail political unrest and riots, the Egyptian government (as well as its United States counterpart) was unprepared for what actually occurred—residents left the digital public sphere, reappropriating Cairo’s streets and reconnecting the city before gathering in Tahrir Square. Looking closely reveals that the media blackout served to mobilize the uprising; people went through their neighborhoods, knocking on doors and spreading the word face to face. It was a combination of street tactics and Internet tactics that enabled the revolution.21 This transition from digital to nondigital political participation presented a significant intervention and socio-spatial formation in an era where online and offline possession of space and spatial presence are increasingly critical. The automatic response to injustice as evidenced in Tehran, Cairo, Madrid, and New York, and indeed throughout much of history, has been to gather and collectively demonstrate in the physical space of the streets.
This brings the discussion to one of the main points—social media challenges the Habermasian definition of a unitary public sphere, leaving us instead with something slippery and entirely provisional. Social media can be seen as a process of mutuality wherein structural media and human actions co-produce one another—a chain of circumstance connects them. A Facebook page may start out as a simple discussion forum. Sharing image postings of startling events, members may begin to discuss the implications of the latter. Opinions are voiced and heard, and a consensus begins to take shape. There are plans and organizational efforts. But can participation remain solely in the digital sphere? To “like” a political cause is not equivalent to engagement—one must show up and participate.22

Physical space, however, is not unaffected by networked spaces of surveillance and publicity. As people leave the confines of their screens, offices, schools, and homes they move into the streets, making their presence known (Figure 2). A crucial point is that once the demonstration has moved into the streets or square—to a physical public space—it is videotaped by amateur, national and international news sources. An important circularity of imaging connects the active practices of a local networked public to global media attention. This point is hardly lost on government security forces that can upend the cycle by surveying individual images and video footage as a means to identify and arrest protestors. The inexplicit relations contained within networked technologies have equal power to limit as well as liberate.

Conclusion

Questions about the changing status of the public sphere continue to arise. The transformative power accessed and concealed within social media technologies is not always positive. As social justice movements challenge previously held notions concerning the construction of discursive space online and offline, a tension between Habermasian ideals of democratic publics and a Foucauldian observation of biopolitics and surveillance is emerging. Unlike Habermas’s unitary public, however, today’s social media is compromised and contradictory, flickering between visibility and invisibility.23 This indirect audience is technologically dependent and thereby unstable. As long as there is a possibility that these sites may be taken offline for any number of reasons (for example, through state political interference or an emergency response), or monitored and conversations traced, there is a significant diminishment in Habermasian democratic discourse. Social media technology has multiple dimensions and may be repurposed for various objectives. Governments regularly restrict and control information, in addition to creating their own content for political objectives. The design and interpretation of a technology may initially stabilize, offering analytical closure, but newly relevant social groups or interpretations may later destabilize it.24
Social media is only the newest version of an ongoing problem related to mediated publics, yet the Internet’s displacement of the public sphere leaves many philosophical issues unresolved. Mediation more generally causes complications involving decontextualization, anonymity, and the blurring of public and private. At the same time, the lack of context of online spaces creates ambiguous audiences. Not all audiences are visible when a person is participating in online activity. Without control over context, the distinction between public and private becomes difficult to maintain. The public and the private, formerly defined for example in architecture as separate and distinct entities, are becoming increasingly intertwined by way of mediation, so that their differences are now negligible. The characteristics of social media, its structural properties—its commercialization of the market economy, its uneven accessibility, and its surveillance—all affect the social environment and thus influence people and their behaviors. They complicate boundaries and collapse distinct social contexts, all of which challenges the primacy of physical place in circumscribing public agency. As demonstrated by Internet activism, social media has not only permanently altered the discursive context of the historical public sphere; it has concurrently opened up a philosophical territory ripe for reconsideration.

1 In the case of the Arab uprisings, the underlying “social and economic conditions, coupled with rising prices and unemployment, political repression, lack of political freedoms, and corruption, called not only for a wide array of socioeconomic reform, but for political change as well. Protesters demanded higher wages, improved public services in the health, education, and transportation sectors, the elimination of government corruption, an end to police torture and arbitrary detainment, and the creation of a fair judiciary system.” Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy, “Protest Movements and Political Change in the Arab World,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (28 January 2011), 5.
6 Elsewhere I have written about non-proprietary social media and counterpublics; see The Public Space of Social Media: Connected Cultures of the Networked Society (Routledge 2013).
7 An exception is Zuccotti Park, a privately held public space (POPS)
that Occupy Wall Street (OWS) used as a staging ground and campsite. The park’s private status allowed for protesters to stay past municipal curfew hours.


9 Blocking access to a particular website cannot stop sophisticated Internet users from employing virtual private networks or other technologies to access unbanned IP addresses outside the country in order to access banned sites. In response to this problem, China shut down Internet access to all of Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the location of ethnic riots by Uighurs in 2009. More recently, Egypt followed the same tactic for the entire country.


12 The importance of email lies in its democratic nature: Email is an open protocol (RFC822). Anyone who can buy a domain name can host an email server and issue new email addresses. Domain names are democratically controlled by IANA/IANA Internet protocol.


14 I refer not only to technological literacy but also to language literacy. Today, literacy in English is almost required; the majority of all web pages are written in English, although this situation is changing over time. In contrast, mobile device use for accessing the Internet is increasing among traditionally underrepresented groups.

15 Nancy Fraser identified the fact that marginalized groups are excluded from a universal public sphere, and thus it is impossible to claim that one group would in fact be inclusive. However, she claimed that marginalized groups formed their own public spheres, and termed this concept a subaltern counterpublic.


17 Conventional cell phones (as well as GPS capable devices) can be enlisted to locate dissidents. Cellular network providers can geographically pinpoint any cellphone connected to their network through pinging or triangulation.


20 The 2011 Egyptian Protests began on January 25, 2011. As a result, on January 25 and 26, the government blocked Twitter and later Facebook throughout the country. On January 27, various reports claimed that access to the Internet in the entire country had been shut down. The authorities responsible achieved this by shutting down the country’s official domain name system in an attempt to end mobilization of anti-government protests. As a result, approximately 93% of all Egyptian networks were unreachable by late afternoon. The shutdown happened within the space of a few tens of minutes, not instantaneously, which was interpreted to reflect companies having received phone calls one at a time ordering them to shut down access, rather than an automated system taking all providers down at once. Analysis by BGPMon showed that only 26 BGP routes of the 2,903 routes registered to Egyptian networks remained active after the blackout was first noticed; thus an estimated 88% of the whole Egyptian network was disconnected.

21 Seeta Pen Gangadharam, “‘Tyrannies of Participation’” (panel discussion, ISEA, Sabaneci University, Istanbul, 16 September 2011).

22 Joanne McNeil “Occupy the Internet,” in N+1 OWS Gazette 1.

23 Sylvia Lavin has written extensively about electronically mediated atmospheres and environments. Lavin uses flickering to refer to “neither an open nor closed space but an environmental mode held together by a vast array of moving particulate matter flickering between on or off.” See “Architecture Anime or Medium Specificity in a Post-Medium World,” 139, (paper presented at the 10th International Bauhaus Colloquium, Weimar, 2007).


26 Theorists such as David Beers insist that we are at a crucial moment of debate, when the parameters and scope of the study and understanding of social media are being set. David Beers, “Social Networking Sites: a Response to danah boyd & Nicole Ellison,” Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 13 2008, 516–529.

27 Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place.