The Revolution Might Be Tweeted but the Founding Will Not Be: Arendt and Innis on Time, Authority, and Appearance

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ABSTRACT *This article examines political founding in an internet age. Drawing on Hannah Arendt and Harold Innis, the article considers the 2011 Egyptian revolution in light of three features of founding: the problems posed by beginning, authority, and appearance. It finds that death narratives, acceleration, and a personalized media dynamic complicated the Egyptian effort, but that new forms of visibility may prove promising.*

KEYWORDS *Democracy; Founding; New media; Toronto school; Philosophy*

RÉSUMÉ *Cet article examine la fondation politique à l'ère d'internet. S'inspirant d'Hannah Arendt et d'Harold Innis, il considère la révolution égyptienne de 2011 par rapport à trois caractéristiques de la fondation, à savoir les problèmes posés par le commencement, l'autorité et l'apparence. L'article constate que les narrations sur la mort, l'accélération, et une dynamique personnalisée des médias ont compliqué l'effort égyptien, mais que de nouvelles formes de visibilité pourraient s'avérer prometteuses.*

MOTS CLÉS *Démocratie; Fondation; Nouveaux médias; École de Toronto; Philosophie*

Introduction

When it comes to political founding, major analyses tend to focus on the great revolutions of the eighteenth century—the American and French in particular (Arendt, 1963; Burke, 1986). These examples supply a rich basis for considering the challenges and dangers of revolution, as well as the elusive dynamics of founding, but they are constrained in one important regard. By looking at founding in any given era, we see it work through particular media dominant at the time. In the case of eighteenth-century revolutions, this means writing and printing in the form of early newspapers and pamphleteering. Today, revolution is facilitated by and expressed through the internet and social media.[1] Might this change in communications habits influence the dynamics of revolution and the foundings they aim at? And could such change translate into changed prospects for freedom and stability in the wake of the founding moment?

The connection between communications and political founding plays an important role in Hannah Arendt's (1963) *On Revolution* because the sharing of words and deeds in an intimate and bounded setting forms the basis of our political and moral

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lives. What saved the American Revolution from absolutism, she says, was having its roots in the small, face-to-face "self-governing bodies" of the early colonies held together "solely by the strength of mutual promise" (p. 156). If, as this view suggests, our communications habits are linked to our moral prospects, then we must take seriously the implications of any change in our dominant media.

Like Arendt, Harold Innis believed communications help shape the prospects for freedom and humane politics, although not in a deterministic way (Frost, 2003; Noble, 1999). The effect, he thought, was due to the "bias" (Innis, 1991, p. 64) of a medium toward either time or space. Non-durable but portable space-biased media favours empires and centralized authority, while time-biased media, with its localized effect and longevity, fosters religion and decentralization (Innis, 1991). If you lean too far in either direction, society risks rigidities that imperil freedom and invite brutality.

Innis' work helps flesh out the communications dynamics identified in Arendt's thinking. The small councils she admired in the American colonies would, for Innis, be inherently linked with script writing as a medium of communication—an intensely collaborative effort that retains many face-to-face oral patterns with their qualities of longevity and social interaction. So while Arendt's commentary on revolution suggests that the social habits of a population set the scene for either a stable or chaotic transition to founding, Innis shows why these relations need to be grounded in a communications order that favours human-paced engagement. The prospects for political founding, it seems, are tied to our communications environment.

But do these theories hold true in the new world of digital communications? Because it puts them to the test in an extreme way, the "Arab Spring" highlights the relationship between communications and revolutionary founding. Indeed the rapid destabilization of the region is a lesson in the unprecedented reach of new media. This article takes its reference case from the middle of this period, involving one of the largest and best-documented revolutionary movements—that of Egypt. The timing of this uprising allowed plenty of opportunity for digital media to make its mark on events and as one observer insists, "If this wasn't a 'social media revolution,' there is no such thing" (Faris, 2013, p. 176).

The article begins by considering a "new narrative," credited to the Arab Spring, concerning the potency of a young, digitally enabled population to initiate change (Brym, Godbout, Hoffbauer, Mendard, & Huiquan Zhang, 2014; Hofheinz, 2011), and finds it reveals little about prospects for founding. To identify what founding requires, the second section of this article turns to Arendt's work on the American Revolution, where communication practices set the stage for a new beginning. The third section then examines key Arendtian issues of *time*, *authority*, and *appearance* through an Innisian lens and suggests these requirements may be harder than ever to navigate. The fourth section examines these factors in the Egyptian context, where it seems digital media may drive us further from achieving the delicate balance between stability and freedom required for healthy politics, yet because it introduces new forms of visibility, may also have emancipatory promise. The article concludes by suggesting one way to approach the challenges of founding is through conscious media diversification.

Tweeted revolution

In his 2010 *New Yorker* piece entitled "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," Malcolm Gladwell suggested social media's weak ties were suited only to shallow pursuits focused on the needs of a privileged technological elite. Regardless, a chain of events taken as spurring on revolution in Egypt had its roots in social media. When a Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, self-immolated on December 17, 2010, accounts of his suffering and death—including graphic images of his injuries—circulated quickly. Some maintain the circulation was primarily thorough television (Alterman, 2011), although others argue that the rapid speed of reaction places the internet at the origins of the Arab Spring (Faris, 2013; Halverson, Ruston, & Trethewey, 2013). In Egypt, social media again played a role in memorializing the death of a young man, Khaled Said, beaten to death by Egyptian police in June 2010. A disturbing cellphone photo of Said's corpse inspired a popular Facebook page, although no protesting reached the level of the Tunisian unrest until early the following year.[2] Prompted in part by events in Tunisia, a protest against policing abuses was called for January 25 in Tahrir Square, and notice of the movement spread through social media and texting.

Thus began the central period of the revolution: eighteen days of popular protest, army crackdowns, and the ebb and flow of internet activism and censorship (including regime efforts to disable internet and cellular communications), at the end of which President Hosni Mubarak was removed by the Egyptian Army. Throughout this period the internet was used by both sides but not always in predictable ways. Protesters used it to raise awareness and organize resistance, but also to conceal their actions through misinformation. The authorities turned to the internet to anticipate protest activities and identify activists both before and after the uprising (El-Hibri, 2014; Herrera, 2014). Undaunted, utopianists find inspiration in the Egyptian experience, and maintain that even if occasionally used for surveillance and misinformation, the medium "cannot help" but favour "public speech … collective action … and instantaneous access to information, communication and organization" (Browning, 2013, p. 71).

Some commentators suggest it is a mistake to view the events in Tahrir Square as stand-alone phenomena, since they were deeply conditioned by what went before. The groundwork was laid through years of social suffering and economic stagnation, as well as a series of movements and mobilizations committed to change (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Hirst, 2012; Winckler, 2013). Yet even if change was fomenting, there are questions to be asked about why 2011 constituted the tipping point, and what, if any, influence it had on the overall trajectory of change.

Before attributing the revolution to social media, scholars recommend we "interpret its role with great caution" since it is "unclear just how important" it really was (Brym et al., 2011, pp. 270, 268). There is evidence, for instance, that social media was a bit player when it came to popular communications. Although it was among the heavier users in the region, Egypt's level of internet penetration in 2011 was between 22 percent and 30 percent—relatively modest by global standards.[3] And while 84 percent of Egyptians report turning to television to follow events, only 6 percent used Facebook and less than 1 percent used Twitter and email (Brym et al., 2014), and a remarkable 93 percent report relying on firsthand communication for their news (Aday,

Farrell, Freelon, Lynch, Sides, & Dewar, 2013). The effect of social media, it seems, was largely due to interest from *outside* the country. Studies found that only 14 percent of Twitter clicks originated inside Egypt, and only in one in ten tweets (Aday et al., 2013; Brym et al., 2011).[4] Egyptians who did use social media during the revolution were generally young, middle class, well educated, and politically inexperienced (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Howard & Parks, 2012), and there were distinct opinion leaders or "power users" who provided most of the content later retweeted by more "passive" users (Boyraz, Krishnan, & Catona, 2015, p. 102; see also Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce, & Boyd, 2011). Meaning that even at its most influential, social media favoured a narrow technological elite.

Perhaps the most telling feature of the Egyptian experience when it comes to social media, however, is that the greatest mobilization happened when the internet was taken out of the equation. Mubarak's regime attempted to shut down the internet and cellular service beginning on January 28 and continuing for several days. Instead of stalling the revolutionary movement, the measure drove people into the streets throughout Cairo and Egypt, some in an effort to find out what was going on, others to locate loved ones who might be in harm's way (Hassanpour, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2011). The shutdown period was both dramatic and short-lived, and the majority of Egyptians (56%) cite it as a positive development for the uprising (Alterman, 2011). That it is also taken as evidence of the significance of social media to the revolutionary movement poses its own puzzle: Why is the resilience, indeed acceleration, of a movement in the *absence* of digital media interpreted as evidence of its centrality?

More importantly, is it safe to assume that the wildfire-like mobilization made possible by digital communications always favours the aims of a revolutionary movement? Some commentators suggest that the events of January 2011 had perverse consequences. While the crisis may have ousted a dictator, they suggest it strengthened the army (Saleh, 2012), which played the role of champion of the state. In 2013 the military again stepped in to remove a sitting president (the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi) and by all reports remains influential in the new regime (Trager, 2015). Despite high hopes in the wake of the revolution, its net impact, including the return to authoritarianism with its resulting disillusionment, may have undermined rather than advanced prospects for democracy (Bhuiyan, 2015; Brown, 2013; Cavatorta, 2015).

So Gladwell's prognosis may have missed the mark in an important regard; the revolution may well be tweeted, but only because disruption is the easy part in social change. The hard part is forging solidarity around new authority. In which case the real question concerns the implications of social media for political founding. For as Arendt (1963) put it, "there is nothing more futile than rebellion and liberation unless they are followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom" (p. 133).

The roots of successful founding

To understand how the internet and social media might help or hinder political founding we must first get a clearer picture of what founding requires. Hannah Arendt (1963) was a theorist of both revolution and founding and made a crucial distinction between the two. The closest thing to a successful modern revolution Arendt identifies in her

work is the American case, and her analysis sheds light on key challenges in the process. Each must be successfully navigated to ensure a population exits the violent conditions of revolution in favour of healthy politics. Communications, she suggests, helps constitute this new beginning by smoothing over otherwise distressing demands of innovation.

The first challenge is that of beginning itself. Arendt (1971) thought it among the most dangerous of conceptual challenges, because it brings man close to things "unthinkable" (p. 208). There can be an *ex nihilo* quality to human action that unnerves participants. The problem, Arendt (1963) explains, is one of disorientation. In essence, there is *too much* freedom to this experience and beginning has "nothing whatsoever to hold on to; it is as if it came out of nowhere in either time or space … it is as though the beginner had abolished the sequence of temporality itself" (p. 198). We invent causes other than ourselves largely in an effort to obscure this discomforting quality from ourselves. But because they seek to displace or diminish our capacity for action-as-beginning, these substitutes pose the greatest danger to freedom. The challenge, then, is how to "restart time" (Arendt, 1971, p. 214) without defaulting to unhealthy forms of authority.

Yet founding, like all politics, requires some kind of authority, or "*auctoritas*" (Arendt, 1963, p. 193, italics in original), to stabilize it, and a successful founding is one that strikes a balance between authority and freedom, although this balance is easily disturbed. Arendt (1963) believed our natural capacity as beings who begin new things provides all the authority we really need for politics, although we very rarely recognize this, and are drawn to absolutes for their soothing qualities. But because they inject an unreasonable quality into politics they become the roots of our worst brutalities. She specifically cautions against bringing "the social" (p. 81) into politics, especially as it concerns poverty, social discrimination, or other forms of human suffering. Social demands are bottomless, she warned, and will by nature lead to an all-consuming form of government.

In contrast, the American founders solved the problem of authority through a peculiar but effective form of self-delusion. Their "great good fortune" as she put it, was their instantaneous "blind worship" (Arendt, 1963, p. 190) of their Roman-revival style founding documents, which stabilized the process. This is about as close as any people in the modern era come to recognizing their own hand in beginning. Their experience suggests one solution to authority is this: beware of "bewitchment," (Arendt, 1971, p. 115) by language, but be prepared to fall for a little of it in order to render the process sustainable. The "best we can do" when faced with "the quandary" of founding, she says, is turn to "legendary tales," which help us "come to grips with the mysterious" (Arendt, 1971, p. 203).

Given Arendt's (1958) famous emphasis on the "sharing of words and deeds" (p. 198) it should come as no surprise that she believes face-to-face political discussion among the American colonists saved their revolution from inevitable tendencies to excess. Having the necessary political infrastructure in place as part of colonial self-organization, meant there was less actual innovation required. But more importantly, authentic appearance is *itself* a means of assuring happiness (Arendt, 1958, 1963), and

this is one of the ends politics should serve. The "actual content of freedom" she explained, "is participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm" (1963, p. 22). Such participation is more than merely instrumental; it is an intrinsic form of happiness. For within the public "space of appearances … freedom can unfold its charms" (Arendt, 1963, p. 23).

In many ways, then, communications lie at the core of a successful founding. They help stabilize a community by grounding the temporal displacement of the revolutionary process in an intimate, first person setting. And, done right, can yield a kind of happiness-through-appearance, although it may take blind fortune or willful self-delusion to see it through. Arendt's three factors have a parallel in Innis' theory of communications, where time, space, and authority also frame the contours of a social order.

The hazards of communications

Innis shares Arendt's concern with creating stability in an uncertain world, but not her confidence that innate capacities provide the starting point. Ever fascinated with the dynamics of change, John Bonnett (2013) likens Innis' thinking to that of emergent systems theory, where a buildup of stimuli triggers disruption and eventual adaptation. Innis recognized that these patterns could go to extremes and believed societies thrive when an "appropriate tension" (Babe, 2013, p. 36) is maintained between the forces of space and time that frame human experience. What Bonnett (2013) calls the potent "edge-of-chaos state" (p. 130) is for Innis (1991) a point at which we should intervene to restore balance or risk "new forms of savagery" (p. 29). Moderns run this risk, Innis (1991) believed, through a neglect of time. Fast but ephemeral communications foreshorten time, overwhelming any residual time-binding traditions and undermining the skills needed to manage time well. This "[l]ack of interest in the problems of duration" suggests the necessary balance between time and space is "seriously disturbed" (p. 76). Time-binding qualities are indeed crucial to humane politics, but the storytelling and constitutional worship Arendt cites are, for Innis, squarely a function of habit rather than luck or genius; and habits can be lost. At the root of the American Revolution, Innis (1991; 2007) sees not Arendt's small councils, but an embryonic press industry cultivating short attention spans and volatile politics. The overwhelming "present-mindedness" (Innis, 1991, p. 62) of the modern psyche led him to conclude we were losing our capacity to engage time in a way that moderates political excess.

The price we pay for this imbalance is increasingly unhealthy forms of authority. The sense of reverence and Roman tradition that Arendt sees surrounding the American Revolution does not, in Innis' view, survive the founding, and political space becomes the pretext for empire rather than the context for freedom. With its roots in the popular press, modern democracy demands simplification, as only easy-to-communicate ideas can thrive in a marketplace characterized by speed, limited attention, and poor thinking. The modern tendency toward absolutism was no accident in Innis' (1946) view, because absolutes are simply *easier*. Adaptive traditions that sustained the ancients are, he thinks, undermined by the kind of constitution writing that is today seen as the very hallmark of founding, but is really just an escape from the clamour of public opinion. Roman tradition cannot be invoked through a written founding because writing is what undid the genius of Roman law, creating "necessity for revo-

lution" (Innis, 1991, p. 7). Because, he explains, it ensures "the dead hand of the written tradition" (2007, p. 80) is "stamped" (1946, p. xiv) on new regimes, constitutionalism replaces "living growth" with "the dead letter," (2007, p. 127) leaving societies with "nothing to worship but the totalitarianism of the modern state" (1946, p. 55).

We can counter this decline by a return to the human scale, but this requires re-shaping our communications habits. To put it another way, when it comes to appearance in the public sphere, platform matters. Innis believed modern communications proliferated words and deeds beyond all reasonable scope, while undermining the common understanding crucial to their meaning (Babe, 2013; Innis, 1946). A surfeit of words and deeds, *un*shared, will not produce sustainable politics. Instead, the traditions he celebrated were those that checked cultural excess—the oral tradition of the Greeks counterbalanced the explosive influence of writing in the ancient world, while universities were the last bastion of long-term thinking in modernity (Innis, 1946). Such traditions shrink the scale of communications and strike a balance between dominance of the eye and the ear. But with the possible exception of the American case, modern foundings do not unfold in communicative intimacy—they are mass events. Nor is it as simple as recapturing Innis' oral tradition, because that described not merely face-to-face communications but a fecund coexistence of orality alongside writing.

If orality is not a straightforward cure-all, can anything else counter the onslaught of mechanized communications to make Arendtian appearance possible? Universities were, Innis believed, "still living and human," (1991, p. 32) because, as with the Greeks, "[p]eople had something to say to each other and said it" (1946, p. 67), but he saw the tradition faltering as they became "one of the kept institutions of capitalism" (1946, p. 75). The imperative then is to find practices that, because they proceed from the "search for truth" (Innis, 1946, p. 61), ensure the "avoidance of extremes and extravagance" (Innis, 1946, p. 65). And that means looking for things that counteract or counterbalance unhealthy concentration on any single idiom.

While Innis and Arendt share a sense that communication predisposes us toward more or less healthy forms of authority, Innis' work adds an exacting element to the analysis of founding. Political genius and nostalgia for the ancients may have helped the American cause along, but these alone cannot outweigh enormous changes in how we share words and deeds. If Innis is correct, then we have to ask whether changing our dominant media also changes the prospects for political founding that Arendt identified.

New media and founding in Egypt

The Egyptian experience allows us to see the three factors of time, authority, and appearance in a contemporary setting, as well as watch the dynamics of change in action. It reveals a complex pattern linking politics and communications, some of which would concern both Arendt and Innis, while others may suggest new potential.

The problem of time

As with any revolution, the Egyptian resistance faced the problem of beginning. One commentator described the central period of the Tahrir Square demonstrations as an "Epiphanic Moment," or "a time out of time" (Alexander, 2011, p. 53). The difficulty is the radical freedom of beginning inflicts its own form of suffering, leading to a fascina-

tion with absolutes. There are ways to soften the effects, however. Arendt (1958) opens one chapter in *The Human Condition* with a quote from Isaac Dinesen: "all sorrows can be born if you … tell a story about them" (p. 175). So, one way to ameliorate the experience of beginning is Dinesen's solution, tell a story about them.

Something similar appears to have happened in the Egyptian case. The story surrounding the Egyptian uprising and the Arab Spring more generally is rooted in a compelling narrative form, that of tragedy. The senseless deaths of two young men pitted against authority seem to have provided an absolute point from which the revolutionary story unfolds. Notably, Arendt (1958) parallels natality (the capacity for beginning) with mortality (that we all must die and the world go on without us) as twin limiting conditions of human existence, making the association of death with political beginning especially potent. She explains: "That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning *and end* is the pre-political and pre-historical condition of history" (p. 184, italics added). Even though scholars rightly point out that the reality is far more complex—that the 2011 uprising had deep roots in social and political oppression as well as long-term mobilization against it—it is likely that the revolution needed this narrative to alleviate the responsibilities of beginning by displacing them on to figures who became "martyrs" (Herrera, 2014, p. 107) to a cause they did not know existed.

Jeffry Halverson, Scott Ruston, and Angela Trethewy (2013) believe that internet communications made possible the formation of a martyr narrative that strongly echoed extant North African traditions, and then made its spread fast and furious. They call efforts, such as the wildly popular Facebook page "We are all Khaled Said," "*virtual reliquaries*" (p. 312). These reliquaries not only drew upon powerful martyr traditions buried "deep within the Egyptian psyche" (Herrera, 2014, p. 151), but because they developed online, also took a crucial participatory form that deepened commitment though "communal engagement" (Halverson et al., 2013, p. 327). As Halverson et al. (2013) point out, the origins of the term martyr, and of its Arabic *shahid,* both mean "witness" or one who "testifies to the truth" (p. 322). They explain "[t]he political act of death" can be understood as "an act of communication" (p. 323). Moreover the deaths were "strategically ambiguous enough" (p. 327) to foster "imagined solidarity" through "participatory" storytelling (p. 328) and they associate the outcome with a form of "civil religion" (p. 326). While grounded in very different events, these dynamics are reminiscent of the "worship" and "*pietas*" (Roman civil piety) Arendt (1963, p. 190) associated with the American founding. If true, this martyr element connected revolutionaries to a deep-rooted source of political potency, simultaneously solving the problem of beginning through evocative narrative and providing an absolute to ignite the process.[5]

Arendt has been accused of over-emphasizing the power of beginning until it becomes an unhealthy absolute that "erases the violence and ambiguity" (Honig, 1991, p. 107) of our origins. If natality cannot single-handedly authorize founding for this reason, then death— especially where it involves political martyrdom—cannot either. But Innis reminds us that the stabilizing effects of time come not from novelty alone but from situating innovation within a tradition, which suggests an intriguing possi-

bility. Perhaps it was not death that conveyed political power; perhaps it was the capacity to evoke an extant tradition, one closely associated with the time-binding qualities of religion and the pursuit of truth. This suggests that while the revolution began with a troubling mix of events that "broke" time, these events were powerful because they also held the resources to mend it.

The problem of authority

Dying for a cause can provide a compelling form of narrative to initiate revolutionary action, but it is a difficult one to sustain in the long-term, and traditionalist themes in the martyr narrative mean it can be used in reactionary ways (Herrera, 2014). So even if it soothes the experience of beginning, revolutionaries still need some way to solve the problem of authority in the long-term. And that means translating the power generated at the beginning, into prolonged forms of organization.

In the Egyptian case it appears that the revolutionaries, who temporarily gathered in largely peaceful public demonstration, eventually broke down along lines that followed two different sets of concerns. For secularists the happiness of the people was the first imperative, for Islamists, the role of the Divine provided the authority behind their actions. The eventual conflict between these two attachments led to the undoing of the revolutionary movement (Brown, 2013). The secular-religious conflict is hardly a new one, however, so is there any reason to think this should be linked to living in an internet age?

That a conflict arose between different forms of absolutes is not a reflection on the communications used; that the conflict became a deep-seated obstacle to political progress may be. The debate between techno-pessimists and techno-utopianists has generally raged over the inherent qualities that a medium imparts to the content and views that flow over it, such that it favours certain kinds of communication over others. The issue under contention is whether social media increases political polarization by encouraging homophily—the tendency of people to gather with others like them, or form connections among those with similar views.

It is now recognized that early concerns over homophily may be overstated (Farrell, 2012), so it seems unwarranted to lay the fractious nature of post-revolutionary politics on social media alone. Innis' concern with acceleration and centralization suggests another connection, however, one that also appears in Arendt's (1963) work on the American case. A critical part of that experience, she suggests, was that it involved a kind of "hiatus" (1958, p. 197) between the end of one political order and the founding of another, a pause supplied by America's colonial period (Arendt, 1963). This is one of the most powerful lessons she draws from the use of political fables. Arendt (1958) turns repeatedly to Vergil's *Aeneid,* which tells the tale of Rome's founding by refugees of the Trojan wars, because it details a crucial interlude between the fall of authority in Troy and its reconstitution in Rome.

When it comes to the temporal qualities of founding a new authority in Egypt, the difficulty therefore is threefold. First, regardless of whether we consider television or internet more influential, Egyptians were operating within a communications environment characterized by pronounced spatial reach, with its bias toward centralization and what Innis would consider a neglect of time. Second, the eighteen-day period

associated with the occupation of Tahrir Square, taken as the central moment of the revolution, was a brief gap unlikely to meet the requirements Arendt has in mind for a hiatus. And third, revolutionaries lacked the sustained face-to-face engagement that builds capacity for political life, which ideally a hiatus period should provide. All of which suggests the rapid changes made possible in an internet-era revolution complicate the transition to founding. Add to that the expectation that founding requires a written constitution, and it meant post-revolutionary Egyptians were looking for renewal where it could not be found. The methods they turned to—mechanized communications, jurisprudence, and mass politics—are not in themselves noxious, but they concentrate power that should be diffuse. Innis (1946) stressed active self-moderation over one-sided zeal for any cause saying: "Virtue is the middle way" (p. 65). Under conditions of runaway acceleration such methods squeeze out time for reflection, and augment turmoil rather than stability.

This seems to be borne out in the sober analysis now emerging on Egyptian affairs. Arguing that the failures witnessed in the Egyptian case were not inevitable, Nathan Brown (2013) suggests that the major obstacle faced in the wake of the revolution was not a failure to consult the population (they were summoned to the polls on at least five occasions), it was the general unpreparedness of all parties to form new democratic traditions. What they lacked was a way to effectively overcome the authoritarian legacy and forge new rules of engagement. At the same time, founding (or as Brown puts it "transition"), poses an inevitable paradox, because it calls for careful "design" but in today's world:

> there is no time-out when politics ceases so that political systems can be designed in a pristine atmosphere; there is no magic moment when political actors put aside their own goals, values, and experiences and stand aloof from day-to-day political struggles. (p. 56)

So even if successful founding requires a "time-out" or hiatus as Arendt describes, we are increasingly unlikely to see it (that is, if it was ever really possible outside of colonial adventures). Instead, the internet feeds a "catalytic spread of unrest" (Howard & Parks, 2012, p. 361) that compresses the collapse and refounding process into a single tight operation, squeezing out Arendt's hiatus. As one analyst observed, internet-era communications serve as an "accelerant" on political affairs. And while they cannot single-handedly make history happen, they did, in the case of the Egyptian revolution "make history happen faster" (Browning, 2013, p. 85). Might this explain why Egypt's attempts to grapple with the problem of authority have gone so poorly?

The problem of appearance

The third problem Arendt (1958) identifies concerns appearance. Or rather, it might be more accurate to say that political founding is the *solution* to the problem of appearance. This is what politics is constituted for: to create a space within which we can appear before one another as equals, combining our individual strengths into a form of common power. Through politics we overcome the challenges inherent in the human condition by assuring boundedness, continuity, and intelligibility, and providing a crucial venue for the experience and exercise of freedom. What role, therefore,

did appearance play in the Egyptian experience, especially in light of the increasing use of digital communications to mediate that experience?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that Arendt warned against bringing "the social" into politics. Politics is a radically different kind of space, she argued, and is undermined by purely social concerns. What does it mean, then, if one of the roots of the Egyptian revolution lies in the use of "social" media? There are several reasons to doubt we can entirely set aside her concerns over the corrupting influence of social obsessions. First and foremost, social media is premised on the personal identity of the user, and even if they render it visible to the world, remains rooted in private lives and tastes. This migration of the private and personal into the realm of the political troubled Arendt (1963). As she explains:

> the demand that everybody display in public his innermost motivation, since it actually demands the impossible, transforms all actors into hypocrites; the moment the display of motives begins, hypocrisy begins to poison all human relations. (p. 88)

Arendt (1963) links this tension to the importance of a certain kind of "*persona*" required for the public space, one that recognized that "natural man" (p. 97, italics in original) was not the true participant figure of politics, but rather the citizen. Any attempt to make personal life the foundation of politics invites extremism, she warns, for "the light of the world" invariably "distorts the life of the heart" (p. 87).

Moreover the focus on individuality runs counter to the origins of political power. As she explained in a well-known passage: "The hope for man in his singularity lay in the fact that not man but men inhabit the earth" (p. 166). Thus getting past our singularity is a crucial requirement for founding.[6] In contrast, social media lends itself to a strange understanding of the way private preferences amalgamate into public activism. They raise the idea of a "leaderless" movement (Howard & Hussain, 2011, p. 37) based on "people power" while in reality fostering a kind of political celebrity Arendt disdained. She writes scathingly about "the professional revolutionist" whose real profession is cultivating "Bohemia" as an "island of blessed leisure" (Arendt, 1963, pp. 250–251) based on theory and analysis. Indeed she saw leadership as a regrettable, albeit inevitable, feature of revolutionary movements (LeJune, 2013). While the uprising generated its own celebrity activists, that we take their role seriously is evidence of little more than our own gullibility. As Innis (1991) succinctly put it, developments in communication that have "made for greater realism" have also "made for greater possibilities of delusion" (p. 82).

The internet provides a new venue for Arendt's (1963) "professional revolutionists" who for all their study, neither accurately anticipate nor fully understand the phenomenon they champion. As private figures with public profile they become unavoidably associated with the revolutionary cause, but are unlikely to advance its most important goals. Social media can provide the leading voices of a revolution, perhaps even ensure their proliferation, but by virtue of its roots in the private and the social, its "boho" qualities suggest its potential to contribute meaningfully to (re)founding the political realm is questionable.

Two qualities of internet-age communications might offset this limitation. First, enhanced capacity for anonymity, and second, widespread engagement. The problem

is anonymity runs counter to the imperative of appearance. Instead of positing a healthy form of masking found in "the legal personality" (Arendt, 1963, p. 98) of the citizen, it suppresses appearance entirely. Worse still, it promises to reveal the natural man in terms of motives and beliefs, while in reality has made possible new techniques of deception and fakery (Cook, Waugh, Abdipanah, Hashemi, & Rahman, 2014). Anonymity of this kind is a long way from what Arendt had in mind.

Likewise the widespread engagement that the internet facilitates may fall below the bar Arendt sets for political action. One of the things the internet does best is support emotive states (Howard & Parks, 2012), and its role in "the sharing of grievances" (Rennick, 2013, p. 157) may have helped lay the groundwork for the Arab Spring. These participatory capacities prove powerful in the spread of martyr narratives and aligning discontent, but the same results are not assured in terms of discourse. Mood, while it may ignite a populace, is not politics in Arendt's (1963) view. Arendt's concerns are reinforced by Innis' (1991) view that "mechanized communication" undermined what we need for beginning new things. "The oral dialectic" he maintained, " is overwhelmingly significant where the subject matter is human action and feeling and it is important in the discovery of new truth" (p. 191). All that modern media offered, in contrast, was an increase in "cruelty" (p. 191).

There is however, at least one area where internet-age communications might deliver the kind of counterweight Innis imagined, and that concerns visibility. There are reports that authorities hesitated to move on protesters because of the possible presence of camera-equipped cellphones that could document and broadcast their actions (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Although it originally appeared alongside writing and printing, imagery, Innis (1946) recognized, adds a distinct dimension to communication and he relates it to developments in religion rather than administration. If digital media makes more pervasive use of the visual dimension, could this new dominance of the eye make a difference? Indeed, being seen is not only a source of happiness but also a form of accountability, and therefore places our actions within the bounds of a particular narrative that bears witness to our story (Arendt, 1958). To the extent that they introduce a pervasive form of witnessing—of each seeing the other's actions in politics and knowing our own actions may be likewise observed—cellphones reintroduce a kind of seeing, and with it a shared sense of appearance. Whether it is sufficient to address the problem of appearance that Arendt identifies is not clear, but its role in the Egyptians conflict is, at the very least, suggestive.

One of the closest connections to Arendt's work observed in the Egyptian context, however, relied not on the use of digital communications, but on their absence. The regime's attempt to shutdown the internet drove people to gather spontaneously, and favoured local, face-to-face encounters over high-profile mass events (Hassanpour, 2014). By many accounts this was the turning point for the revolution: when people took to the streets not to their computers. On the first day of the shutdown, attendance at Tahrir dropped off steeply in favour of small neighbourhood gathering places. This decentralization was more difficult to control and may have proved the real undoing of the regime. As a Human Rights Watch observer reported at the time, the police could no longer control the crowds, as there were "*too many protests in too many places*"

(Hassanpour, 2014, p. 20, italics in original). Ironically, then, the best thing that happened for the Egyptian revolution may have been the temporary disruption of digital communications and the widespread surge of engagement that followed; a surge of participatory power cut short by its rapid reconnection. This poses an interesting possibility: Could a prolonged "unplugging"—characterized as it was by decentralized, first-person engagement—have provided something close to the hiatus Arendt recommends? The dramatic shift from spatial- to time-based communications affirms the potency Innis assigned to the interaction between media as a requirement for humane politics. If sustained, might it also provide an opportunity for the development of new political habits in an otherwise overwhelmed digital world?

Political founding in an internet age: Absolutist or emancipatory?

Although she never took up the communications question directly, Arendt's account of eighteenth-century founding provides a framework for understanding founding in our own era. She turns our attention to three central problems facing a post-revolutionary populace: those of beginning, authority, and appearance. Harold Innis' work shows how these three elements link to our communications habits, affirming the importance of media to healthy politics. Seeing how Egyptians navigated these challenges in the 2011 revolution therefore tells us something about how internet-age communications may reshape the landscape for political founding.

First, in the case of beginning, by providing the venue for the "*virtual reliquaries*" (Halverson et al., 2013, p. 312) as well as a participatory method of veneration, the internet and associated media reinvigorated a tradition of martyr narratives. By making them available as a form of political absolute, this narrative communicates powerfully and pervasively about the relationship between necessity and freedom, as well as the capacity for appearance even under desperate conditions. But as with any absolute it can be a source of both power and abuse, and its potency draws on existing beliefs. Next, the accelerated pace of revolution and founding may have made the problem of authority intractable in the Egyptian case. The sheer unpreparedness of the revolutionaries and the absence of any tradition of compromise handicapped efforts from the start. Without a hiatus in which to address this, the revolution appears to be following a course back to authoritarianism. But this inability to stabilize authority may not be a uniquely Egyptian problem. Digital communications with its pronounced space-bias, and weak time-binding traits, sets the stage for volatility. Only a conscious effort to rebalance our communications habits, including efforts to reinvigorate oral traditions, can offset these tendencies. Finally, internet-age communications introduce new forms of appearance. Some fall below Arendt's standard for political action and we would be wise to limit our expectations concerning their emancipatory impact. At the same time, by making the act of witnessing more pervasive some technologies have political potential, although very little carries the significance or power of face-to-face communications.

So it appears that social media and digital communications prove useful for the quick removal of autocrats, but not for long-term process change. The internet may serve as a "catalyst" for revolution "hastening the disintegration of the status quo" (Hassanpour, 2014, p. 1), but it shows a mixed record when it comes to supporting

founding as a process of stabilization. One thing that transcends the communications setting, however, is Arendt's imperative that politics must be devoted to political ends and not something else. The ends to which politics can rightly aim are those of freedom and appearance in the public space. There is no necessary reason these ends should be unattainable in an internet age, yet they do require us to occasionally come, quite literally, face-to-face with our problems—political adversaries included—and nothing in this analysis suggests a substitute. However much life has accelerated in the digital age, the Egyptian experience reminds us that an essential requirement for founding is "taking time" (Lesch, 2014, p. 68).

Yet in the final analysis, while digital communications accelerated the process of change, it could not single-handedly determine the fate of the revolution, for reasons that both Arendt and Innis would recognize. No matter how explosive, the new is never entirely new. It arrives into a context, and existing dynamics help shape future prospects. So when it comes to founding we should not think of media in essentialized terms. Instead both thinkers look beyond raw innovation for patterns and practices that make healthy change possible. It is easy to lose sight of this element in Arendt's work, given her love affair with beginning, indeed she may have lost sight of it herself on occasion. Bringing Innis into the conversation helps ground Arendt's account and reveals that the energy of founding arises not just in what we change but also in what we keep.

Moreover, Innis helps us understand why one form of appearance can be more successful in founding than another. There is no magic to Arendt's small councils, although they did not operate in isolation—an emerging press formed part of the equation. As with the American case it is easy to misread the Egyptian setting by focusing on digital media alone, even though time without it may have been the crucial factor. Likewise the death-driven storytelling it supplied worked not just because tragic imagery fires the imagination, nor even because storytelling extends over time, but because these particular narratives connect to surviving truth-telling traditions that still mean something.

Perhaps the most important finding of this exercise is the following: adding Innis' work to Arendt's theories reveals a perverse mismatch between the elements we bring to the challenge of founding in a digital age. We are today at the mercy of media that drive constant change and celebrate disruption. Media that thrive on what Innis (1946) called "the intellectual pest of our time—originality" (p. 66) driven, ironically, by insensate exhaustion in an age left numb by its own creativity. Yet digital-age revolutions are expected to produce written constitutions, steady political habits, and reverence for fledgling democracy. It is an unlikely combination. Indeed in Innis' framework, law appears as a technique of administration more than an expression of freedom, suggesting we are moving further away from the Arendtian vision, and are less likely than ever to share our words and deeds effectively. But Innis maps the media environment for one reason: so we can master it, not just suffer it. For this challenge of "regeneration" (Bonnett, 2013, p. 287) we cannot rely on genius, good fortune, or even innate humanity. Nor on some magical combination of media habits. Instead, finding the "middle way" though the digital jungle will require continuous, painstaking work to balance and rebalance our communicative world because, as Innis (1946) warned, "There are no cures" (p. 65).

Notes

1. The article considers the reach of digital media broadly, as the internet cannot now be effectively distinguished from other communications practices that revolutionaries had at their disposal, including cellular networks or television (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011).

2. There is some suggestion that the photo may have been doctored, or that the injuries were sustained post-mortem (Herrera, 2014).

3. Miriyam Aouragh and Anne Alexander (2011) report penetration rates of 30 percent, while Robert Brym, Melissa Godbout, Andreas Hoffbauer, Gabe Mendard, and Tony Huiquam (2014) report a lower 22 percent. They agree that rates for cellphone use in Egypt (80%) far outstripped internet access.

4. Data on usage patterns for various media during the revolution appears in Aday et al., 2013, pp. 6, 11-14; and Brym et al, 2014, p. 270.

5. One Arendt scholar cautions: storytelling should not go so far as to anesthetize us to reality. Instead, for Arendt, "there is virtue in our sorrow" insofar as it provides "an acknowledgement of the enormous burden of political responsibility" inherent in the violence of revolution (LeJune, 2013, p. 25). This makes tragedy an especially potent form of narrative.

6. This migration of the private into the public space is also noted in Ruth Starkman's work on the Muslim Brotherhood, where she points out that Arendt specifically rejects brotherhood as an appropriate model for politics on the grounds that it is excessively personal, and indeed, violent. Brotherhood, Starkman (2013) explains, "remains too volatile a concept for a functioning public sphere" (pp. 601–602).

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