

Communication Studies in Transformation – Self-reflections on an Evolving Discipline in Times of Change

by Carola Richter & Hanan Badr

Abstract

In this article, we review the scientific knowledge produced in communication studies on media change and transformation of communication after the Arab uprisings. We critically examine the wave of techno-deterministic euphoria in mainstream literature of communication studies of the last decade, countering it by more cautious evaluations of media effects. Furthermore, we ask whether scholars located in the Arab world can contribute to a re-orientation in communication studies, and if so, how they can achieve this. We conclude by stating that the Arab uprisings have indeed been a major catalyst for re-thinking the media impact on political and social change in communication studies.

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About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact, not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between Europe and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional but reflect and accelerate global trends. The importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance are not limited to the MENA. Through a transcultural perspective the Working Group Transformation of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to better understand these trends. The Working Group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA can be improved.

Communication Studies in Transformation – Self-reflections on an Evolving Discipline in Times of Change

Monday morning: You are woken up by the alarm clock set on your mobile phone, you get up to check the news of your overseas friends on Facebook before watching the latest world news on TV. On the way to work, you quickly whatsapp your friend that you cannot make the scheduled meeting tonight, then you read your local newspaper app on your tablet.

These daily actions describe ordinary media usage on an average day and summarize the massive changes we have witnessed in our media use. Over the last couple of years the rapid developments in media technology have immensely changed our communication practices; and they are changing them still. Most likely, we follow the same actions like generations before us – waking up, reading newspapers, connecting with friends – but we do it in a different way brought about by new technologies. This process is exactly what communication scholars termed *mediatization* (or medialization). It refers to the incorporation of all kinds of new media technologies in quotidian practices (Hepp & Krotz 2014).

The phenomenon of mediatization takes place on a global scale and has become part of every society. In particular, it has facilitated the transnational transfer of concepts, products and content tremendously. Hence, since the beginning of the digital era in the 1990s and even more so since the advent of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, communication studies have started to shift their focus from the mass consumption of media to the individualized forms of media production and use. Often, however, the mainstream studies on mediatization published in the leading journals in the U.S., the U.K. or Germany remained oddly unpolitical as if new media had stripped the public of its political ambitions. Over the past decade, the majority of the studies have shown us 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). Most of the communication studies focused on new media and for a long time strongly concentrated on researching “developed” societies in the Northern hemisphere such as Europe, North America or Korea and Japan.

Yet, on the other hand, when scrutinizing research on internet communication focusing on China, Africa, and the Middle East, we discover that the studies during the past decade mostly brought the political dimension to the forefront: research explored media regulation by authoritarian regimes, media usage by protest groups, exile media and so on. Communication studies seemed to divide the mediatized world into quotidian practices in the ‘West’, and political effects in the ‘Rest’.¹ It is interesting to observe how the two mentioned theoretical strands of one and the same global phenomenon – namely mediatization – have shaped the development of communication studies in recent years. In particular, we can detect a rather techno-deterministic approach that reduced the ‘Rest’ to a receiver of Western technology yearning for freedom, but at the same time also essentialized the ‘West’ as a homogeneous entity – which it certainly is not.

However, reviewing the scientific knowledge produced in communication studies on media change and transformation of communication five years after the Arab uprisings, we can see interesting developments: The wave of techno-deterministic euphoria has been countered by more cautious evaluations of

¹We borrowed a quote from Stuart Hall here, who spoke about the scholarly construction of ‘The West and the Rest’ with regard to power relations already in 1992.

media effects and interventions from social scientists of different disciplines. In the following sections, we lay out the rationales behind the two different approaches by referring to mainstream literature of communication studies of the last decade, as well as to our own work in the field in which we got used to combine theories and models developed in the West and case studies in Arab societies. Our second focus is on whether scholars located in the Arab world can contribute to a re-orientation in communication studies, and if so, how they can achieve this. We conclude by stating that the Arab uprisings have indeed been a major catalyst for re-thinking the media impact on political and social change in communication studies.

► The Arab World in Focus

Indeed, as the 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 about the role of media and its connection to social and political change in a region that has lacked such attention for a long time. However, with this attention pre-defined concepts and imposed theories have also gained ground. Moreover, many media scholars, in shifting their research interests quickly, have also become what Abaza terms “overnight Middle East experts”. Scholars referred to the events in the Arab countries because they seemed to support their academic approaches, but they stopped doing so as soon as their concepts became no longer sufficient to grasp the complexities of the interactions between media, society and transformation.

It was the Green movement in Iran in 2009 that had for the first time stimulated research about the role of social media in political upheavals (Kamalipour 2010). It seemed to be a wake-up call for closer scholarly attention to the political potential of social media. Later on, the obvious presence of social media in the Arab uprisings tremendously boosted research on media effects in communication studies. After 2011, the investigation of the role of communication in social networks and digital media became a focal point of research in relation to the Arab world. When Egyptians even named their newborn children “Facebook”² and exuberantly thanked social media, there must have been something special about it.

In order to determine the kind of knowledge communication scholars have actually produced on the Arab uprisings, 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 which are listed in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Globally, this collection includes the most influential communication studies journals. Using the topical search terms “Arab spring OR Arab* OR Egypt OR Tunisia OR Libya OR Syria,” we identified 148 original articles that referred to media in the Arab world. Only 66 out of 148 articles actually dealt with an Arab country or local social phenomena, while the majority of the articles (83) simply referred to the “Arab Spring” as a marker, symbol or a cultural concept, but investigated different topics such as the Facebook use of young people in South Africa or the Occupy Wall Street movement. Often, the term “Arab Spring” acts as a specific imagined construct which is transported and reproduced in these research settings, leaving little room for investigating the complex and structural factors behind the uprisings and the respective role of (social) media. Although the simplistic causality of the so-called “Facebook revolution” has meanwhile been highly contested by most researchers, the argument that a revolution had been

² See CNN, February 21, 2011, available on <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/02/21/egypt.child.facebook/>.

triggered by specific communication tools such as Twitter and Facebook was often uncritically accepted and reproduced through the de-contextualized reference to the “Arab Spring” whenever political effects of media needed to be highlighted. The extensive debates between euphoric determinism of social media effects (which are to be found in communication studies) and suspicious notions of social determinism and political economy (which can be found in area studies) are lacking (Badr 2015). So, the evident disconnect between communication studies and area studies, with some exceptions, explains the mentioned de-contextualized reference to the “Arab Spring” in communication studies.

Of the remaining 66 articles investigating Arab media in depth, an overwhelming majority of 52 papers – or 79 per cent – focus on ICT and new media, while only 14 – or 21 per cent of the relevant literature – discuss other aspects of Arab media. For example, one article examines identity formation in Syria and how this is reflected by a particular TV series (Al-Ghazzi 2013). This anecdotal evidence shows how communication studies follow fashionable trends and instantly appealing catchwords. Recent research focusing on the Arab world in particular seems to be obsessed with ICT, neglecting the fact that television is by far the most used medium in the Arab world, reaching almost every household (Dubai Press Club 2010). Even in the most populous Arab country with a relatively advanced technical infrastructure like Egypt, the internet penetration did not exceed 25 per cent of the population in 2011, and rose only after the events of the Arab uprisings to about 32 per cent in 2014.³ In other countries, such as Syria, Libya or Yemen, which also witnessed uprisings, the internet penetration was and still is 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 research in communication studies? One part of the explanation seems to be the scholarly uncertainty about how to grasp the new and developing phenomenon of *mediatization* adequately – established explanations all seem to be outdated. The Danish scholar Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, for example, has summarized the debate about the subfield of political communication and its failed adaptation to what he termed “sociotechnological changes” (Nielsen 2014: 7). He clearly criticizes the non-adaptability of communication studies to new circumstances that started well before the Arab uprisings and were mostly shaped by the invention of the internet. The mediatization of nearly all aspects of life, accelerated by the interactive turn of internet use – also known as Web 2.0 – certainly brought huge challenges for communication studies. Nielsen (2014: 6) describes, for example, how audiences are fragmenting (or cannot even be described as audiences anymore since they produce content while they are consuming at the same time), media organizations are changing, and processes of individualization are taking place. Under these circumstances, he further argues, relying on what he calls “zombie concepts” – concepts that are desperately kept alive, such as agenda-setting, public opinion, and 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 this discipline irrelevant to their societies at the very least.

Over the last decade, there has been a growing sentiment among scholars that classical US-inspired communication studies with their focus on media effects might miss the point (Lynch 2008). This explains the steady growth of research that borrows from other social sciences disciplines, such as media analysis

³ According to statistics of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU): http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2015/Individuals_Internet_2000-2014.xls.

related to 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 easier explanations for complex realities because they had a longer tradition in communication studies – even if they had been discredited. Like in the 1960s, “massive effects” of the media are now being overemphasized by claiming an overly influential role of media 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 (sic!) causal mechanisms allow a politically convenient and superficially plausible “massive effects” assumption to go largely unchallenged” (Lynch 2008: 18). Obviously, this can be explained by a colonial legacy towards the ‘Rest’ that has at first been hidden behind a benevolent rhetoric, but that has later been accelerated with the perception of the triumphant advance of Western technology in the Arab world; this trend has become clearly visible in media and academia during the Arab uprisings. In one of his TV interviews Mark Zuckerberg even explained why social media 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, get access to healthcare for the first time ever, connect with family hundreds of miles away that they haven’t seen in decades. Getting access to the internet is a really big deal!”⁴ Interestingly, he forgot that “here” (in the U.S.) social media are used in political communication as well; political and societal changes are accelerated by certain media practice patterns. Moreover, most of the people “there” (in the non-Western world) seem to use Facebook and other social media for entertainment and personal purposes just like the Western users: they share information about football, music or cute cats (Wheeler 2005; Braune 2013).

Demystifying media technology has often been neglected by scholars. Larry Diamond, a well-known political scientist, coined the term “liberation technology”, which is “any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom” (Diamond 2010: 70). Similarly, the idea of finally having found a tool to facilitate democratization processes has guided most scholarly literature since 2011, in particular with regard to 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 being read in Germany for some 20 years already, the concept of the public sphere appeared prominently in the Anglo-Saxon scholarship only after Habermas’ book, “The structural transformation of the Public Sphere”, had been 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 had a second revival. Accordingly, the main hypothesis is that online media opened up an otherwise repressive and controlled public sphere. In particular the internet is seen as fertile ground for contestation mechanisms, where political and social actors can engage to express contrasting and divergent views, thus also forming counter-publics. This again, so the argument goes, facilitates inter-media agenda setting, i.e. 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 technology-facilitated possibilities would lead to a newly empowered citizenry.

⁴ Mark Zuckerberg on CNN, August 21, 2013, available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8N3wGjiPYg>.

► Challenging Concepts

Going beyond our original review of the major communication studies journals, other perspectives emerged to cope with the witnessed processes in social and political change in the Arab world, as well as in China or Russia, or even through the NSA surveillance scandal in the West. In opposition to what has been called the “utopian” perspective of social media effects, a “dystopian” counter discourse arose. One of its most prominent proponents is Evgeny Morozov. He argues that digital media helped primarily authoritarian institutions like regime elites to find new and more effective ways of controlling and repressing their people (Morozov 2011). Developments in the Arab countries and elsewhere also 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 show an overestimation of the social media effects. Lynch (2013) spoke of a “Twitter devolution” and a “Tahrir bubble”. Embedding this insight into a broader global context, the “normalization thesis” comes into play. According to this thesis, normalization processes happen through commercialization mechanisms, citizens' behaviors, and actors such as the state acquiring new skills, therefore transferring offline power constellations to the online sphere (Anstead & Chadwick 2009). The new innovation becomes normalized.⁵

Similarly, the naïve expectation that the internet will become a platform for rational deliberation and idealistic inclusion needs to be put into perspective. The current debate among European journalists on dealing with the flooding hate speech in online commentaries aptly illustrates how online deliberations are far 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 a real “battleground Facebook” between followers of different political positions (Badr 2013). So, while a highly optimistic depiction of technology prevailed in communication studies shortly after the Arab uprisings, later more nuanced perspectives on (social) media and its contexts emerged to understand the potential role of media in social and political change beyond the initial techno-deterministic view. This development relied on general shifts in communication studies that have started with the advent of the internet, but it has gained a new dynamic with the uprisings of 2011. Yet, it remains that different approaches within communication studies – postcolonial vs. modernist, normative vs. descriptive, and quantitative vs. qualitative – all still continue to co-exist and to find self-serving evidence in the Arab uprisings to legitimize their own findings.

► Arab Inroads?

In the early 2000s various scholars at U.S. universities – often with a “migration background” – felt discomfort when blindly applying Western theories in globalization research. Hence, they started a debate about de-westernizing media and communication studies (Curran & Park 2000). Since then, there has prevailed the question on how “different conceptions about knowledge, humanity, identity, individualism, and community” could help to “produce legitimate” knowledge about societies under investigation (Waisbord & Mellado 2014: 366). Therefore, our own questions in the context of the de-westernization debate can be summarized as follows: Did the uprisings bring more attention to specific Arab academic contributions to the mainstream communication studies? And how can significant local inroads into communication studies be made possible?

⁵ See also the upcoming paper by Graffi & Amft in this working paper series.

To answer these questions, we investigated the background of the authors of the 66 journal articles mentioned above. Indeed, about a third was written by scholars with Arab names. However, most of those scholars are located abroad and affiliated with U.S. or British universities. Only six of the leading authors were actually affiliated with universities in the Arab world, and half of them worked at American universities in the region. Previous investigations of knowledge production by Arab social scientists already told us that only negligible contributions by local scholars are visible in the widely read, high-impact journals. Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanatis analyzed the “politics of citation” (2016: 255) within the context of the Arab uprisings in social sciences 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 US 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 the knowledge production of communication research unless they publish in English or outside their region. Scientific knowledge generated in Arabic remains largely unknown and disconnected from the international research.

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

The general problem, however, as Mohammad Ayish – one of the closest observers of Arab media scholarship – and Harris Breslow have pointed out, 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 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). Therefore, Ayish and Breslow urge to step back and get rid of a media-centric analysis and engage in more interdisciplinary approaches that connect communication research to its neighboring disciplines. The authors suggest three main areas of research interests: 1) the political economy of media with regard to institutions, governance and flows; 2) the increasing mobility of flows and people within the media and 3) the changing nature of the production of identity with regard to media (Ayish & Breslow 2014: 57). Actually, this is in line 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 became more prominent in particular in Great Britain, and also in other European countries and the U.S. cultural studies analyze the complex relations of media and people by looking at the interrelatedness of production, media use and content. Although this research trend promises to offer more contextualized interpretations of social phenomena, it has not yet garnered a lot of followers among local or foreign scholars doing research in the Arab world. In the Arab departments of communication research, critical cultural studies focusing on class, race and gender in relation to the media rarely exist. Enclaves do exist, but mostly rather in studies oriented towards arts, literature and 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 has for instance 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” and bring together the most prominent media scholars of Arab origin. However, most of the scholars who propel this kind of research are Western-based, living and working in the U.S. or the U.K. 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, it is exactly people like those diasporic researchers of Arab descent that through their biographies are able to build the necessary geographical bridges as well as the bridges between contextualized knowledge and innovative media studies. This potential means that Arab scholars in the West can produce meaningful explanations about *mediatization* in an Arab context.

The second underrepresented aspect in 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 has been coined by Marx in its critique of modes of production in 18th century Europe. Later on, it witnessed a conceptual revival within the Frankfurt School founded by Adorno and Horkheimer, and was adopted also by left-wing scholars to criticize neo-liberal policies and deregulation of media reforms. In non-democratic countries, mainstream communication research for a long time subscribed to the paradigm that economic liberalization in the media sector would stimulate democratization. With a lack of public service logic, the state media 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 of the Arab countries has been an even stronger influence by the ruling political regimes. Major media outlets like TV channels were often outsourced to the hands of loyal business elites or simply newly founded by family members of the rulers (Richter & El Difraoui 2015: 12). This is of importance for the local developments but also sheds light on the corporate globalization of media: Alwaleed bin Talal, a Saudi prince, for example, is not only behind the most popular pan-Arab entertainment industry but is also a major shareholder in Twitter, while the Egyptian Coptic billionaire Naguib Sawiris controls most of the telecommunications markets in Africa (Sakr 2013: 2295). Up to now, the important questions of the political economy of Arab media have only randomly been taken up by local scholars but have been again a concern that is 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 are *methodological questions*. At the beginning we showed the ambiguities of scholars who wish to detect causal relations between media and effects, i.e. impacts of media on political and social change. Influenced by political science and social movement research, communication studies have tried to carve out these interactions with quantitative methods by measuring which audiences used what media, how often, for what purposes and with which effects. Others working on everyday life activities related to media and communication often neglected to consider any link to social change, thus simply remaining descriptive in their studies. In general, both strands need to overcome their predefined limits: media use should always be linked to effects; we should just avoid connecting them via causal mechanisms. Therefore, in order to identify dynamics of change, future communication studies need to develop methods and theoretical models to analyze communication processes and media practices. Challenging mainstream trends in current media studies also means shifting the scholarly focus towards 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 essay 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 ethical standards of the profession. Moreover, the notion of citizen journalism ties in, so that this phenomenon could be analyzed through participatory observation: how exactly do local communities in Cairo, Bagdad or Berlin utilize the different media tools in order to articulate their causes and problems?

This demands an interdisciplinary approach where the researchers are willing to learn from various disciplines. At the same time, the other disciplines that have largely acknowledged that media are important spaces of action should be more open to engaging with the knowledge produced in communication studies. In particular, scholars with a local knowledge of culture and politics of the Arab region can bridge area studies with communication studies. The boom of “Arab Spring studies” is noticeable in various disciplines but certain invisible boundaries stop the reception of the core results across neighboring social sciences. This needs to change!

Establishing stronger networks of interdisciplinary cooperation to allow a better circulation of knowledge can also help to meaningfully adapt seemingly universal concepts and models to local research phenomena. The account of Susan O’Rourke, a journalism instructor teaching in Oman, is quite telling in this regard. She shows the difficulty of transferring a journalism undergraduate 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 shows that the notion of universal journalism practice has its limitations.

An essential asset for the production of more “legitimate” knowledge is also to engage in exchanges during which scholars from different geographical and cultural backgrounds can learn from each other. In fact, building such networks in communication studies has been one result of the Arab uprisings, because it showed the necessity for more informed communication studies relying both on local and transcultural scientific knowledge: this motivated all partners to engage more strongly with each other.

Both authors 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 the funding of DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service, 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 consists of eleven partner universities in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Oman, Yemen, Qatar, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Germany. Besides the training courses to tailor media concepts, such as investigative journalism or data journalism, to regional requirements, the AREACORE launched two major projects to produce sustainable knowledge shaped by the academic exchange. At the annual MDLAB summer school, short for Media and Digital Literacy Academy in Beirut, around 30 students and scholars come together to reflect critically on various media artefacts and, interactively, to develop skills to engage in media production themselves. The second major AREACORE project is an online platform for locally produced audio-visual lectures about the media systems of every partner country. This offers authentic knowledge about the specific characteristics of the respective societies and their media systems to a global audience. These are only a few steps on a long road of mutual learning and cooperation between communication and media scholars.

► Conclusion

Major upheavals in the Arab countries certainly posed new questions and gave new directions to communication studies. While the research agenda opened up to add the Arab countries, technological determinism remained a major component of the interpretation of the events. A de-contextualized perspective, focusing only on the media, without its interactions with society and politics, failed to offer answers on vital questions on media and transformation. However, bridges between scholars in and outside the region promise to enrich the discipline, offer it fresh insights, and widen the circle of internationally legitimate knowledge in media studies.

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