Techno-Tahrir: Technology and Anti-authoritarianism in the Arab Spring

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During the height of the protests in Egypt’s Tahrir square in the Spring of 2011, the New York Times published a nighttime photo depicting a group of young protestors huddled around a small fire kindled from scrounged scraps of wood making common cause over the shared intimacy of a simple campfire. What was most interesting about the photo, however, was the way in which the Times chose to display it. The photo was immediately followed in an online slideshow by another photograph of protestors also huddled in a circle. But in this photo the light they shared wasn’t the light of a small fire, but rather light emitted from a pile of blinking cell phones recharging on a communal extension cord. This paper examines the work these images do and argues that the juxtaposition of the two photos reflects two stubborn tropes regarding western representations of technomodernity and the Arab Spring. The first, the idea of technology playing a driving role in democratic transformations via free markets, is a digitalorientalist trope in which only western technology could explain social transformation in the Arab world. Deeper investigations into the protest have been ignored in favor of the fetish of the facebook and the perceived authority and power of western technological modernity. A second trope, technologicalprogressivism, reflects a more general and uncritical view of technology inwhich analyses of the role of technology ignored the political economy of technological innovation and control. This paper examines these two tropes by exploring how pervasive forms of digital orientalism and technological progressivism obscured the particular political structures and economic arrangements of communications technology in Egypt that long produced and relied on particular tools of oppression expressed through control of both the everyday objects and private infrastructure of technology.