



THE MIDDLE EAST AS THE FIRST BATTLEFIELD OF WEB 2.0

NABEEL ODEH AND IKBAL BEN GAIED HASSINE

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Nabeel Odeh and Ikbal Ben Gaied Hassine

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Address: Yenibosna Merkez Disrict. 29 Ekim Street.
Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Block Floor:6 No.:52 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org



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Abstract: This paper looks at the fundamental characteristics of the design of technology platforms in an attempt to shed light on the way technological infrastructure (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) can be used by political actors to create and exert power. Platforms, by design, allow for fluid and dynamic forms of organization, providing the infrastructure for socio-technical networks that can operate simultaneously as value-neutral or value-laden tools. Moreover, due to their dynamic nature, platforms are constantly being shaped by the actors with different capacities, while also shaping them in return. The direction of this change is hard to define, yet an understanding of what their design allows to happen would help provide a better framework for the analysis of this phenomenon and pave the way towards a more understanding to the nature of the social inter-subjectivity between technology and humanity. To this end, this article starts by introducing literature from software studies and design thinking explaining the logic of platforms. Then the article looks at the role of technology in changing the political landscape in the Middle East. Ultimately, this highlights the dynamics whereby actors can manipulate different dimensions and characteristics of platforms design to gain power and make an impact.



Introduction

With the increased ubiquity of technology in our world, new technologies have fundamentally changed social structures, altering the way humans perform basic tasks,¹ the way individuals work and communicate, and modes of political engagement and governance.² According to Bratton, this new structure of the networked society is understood through its “logic of design”.³ Arguably, design thinking applied to the technological architecture of everyday life can provide us with the tools for a deeper understanding of the social dynamics⁴ that are opening up opportunities for real change. It is thus urgent that we build a public understanding of technology away from the simple and naive conceptualisation of technology as a tool, the design of which is limited by default options⁵. This paper proposes a design systems thinking approach as an adequate analytical framework for examining technological structures and the dynamics established within them. It argues that analysing the use of new media technologies – i.e., Facebook and Twitter – in the context of the Middle East within this proposed framework can shed light on the dynamics underpinning the unfolding of the political situations in different countries of this region, including Tunisia, Egypt and Kuwait. This approach has the merit of revealing how new technologies altered the systems in place, led to unsettlement, redistributed power and put the political landscape into a new configuration.

Ultimately, this paper aims to highlight the importance of the reconceptualization of new technologies within the public discourse towards building a better understanding of the political situation. Section 1 reviews literature on design thinking and discusses technology as infrastructure directing

human actions. Section 2 presents a case study which discusses the role of social media technologies in the development of the political situation in the Middle East, and Section 3 presents our conclusions.

Characteristics of Platforms Design

Digital platforms are technological solutions that enable, support, and automate the social activities of human and non-human actors.⁶ They have developed over time to become collaborative spaces for social activities, standardized and framed by protocols and algorithms, and governed by the platforms’ controllers. Thinking from this perspective has the merit of highlighting the link between the particular design features of the program that governs interactions and specific social dynamics⁷. This paper argues that, in order to make sense of social phenomena, and in particular world politics, it is fruitful to reframe the analysis of socio-technical infrastructure, such as social media platforms, around the essential logic of their design.¹

We present three main characteristics² embedded in the design of platforms. These characteristics build on each other to make platforms the way we experience them right now.

1- It is important to note here that when speaking about the logic of a design, we are referring to the characteristics of the system’s design, and ultimately to what these characteristics allow to happen. If we take for instance the relationship between the technological infrastructure and the networks emerging on social media like Facebook, the design would refer to the characteristics of Facebook that led specific communities and/or terrorist groups, to gather and to self-organize as a social network; and also the characteristics of the technological infrastructure that made the structure of these social networks and their impact the way they are now.

2- Originally, the work of Bratton presents 17 characteristics of platforms design: in this paper, the three most relevant ones for the case study are explained (See p.41. to p. 51).



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First, Platforms are designed to be “architecture[s] of interaction”⁸, i.e. they “provide the frames for how we meet, communicate, and stay together online.”⁹ Therefore, communication technologies can either be governed by the controller/coordinator part or the parties who control the coordination¹⁰.

Second, the design of platform systems does not include the design of outcomes through time.¹¹ The idea behind the design is a program of partially user-controlled actions whose outcomes unfold through space and time in an unpredictable manner. This means that the platform is designed to present a specific form/framework for co-ordination and communication, while giving freedom of usage to users. These free spaces are the origin of the value creation within different platforms, or what is also called the “user surplus”¹².

Third, platforms are neither micro/decentralized systems nor macro systems.^{13/14} This specific characteristic is usually leveraged by the controller or co-ordinator, who uses the standardized format of communications to aggregate them and create value for the platform. In other words, these standardized decentralized forms of communication and content created within spaces of freedom and unpredictability can be centralized and capitalized to be turned into assets for a particular actor.¹⁵

All in all, since technology “lies not merely in what can be done with it but also in what further possibilities it will lead to”,¹⁶ to talk about design is also to explore the possibilities its characteristics enable. Arguably, communication platforms become a platform for the “direction” of human actions,¹⁷ or in other words a “platform for social forces”, by making certain types of behaviour more likely, constraining some other types of behaviour, and creating new types of behaviour.¹⁸ Indeed, by offering a new platform for social forces, technological platforms not only alter existing social possibilities but also present the possibility for totally new ones. This sheds light on the political nature of technologies per se and the potential that power systems can embody. Platforms have essentially made communication between geographically-dispersed individuals more likely to happen by lowering its costs. However, since the way actors use this platform is open-ended (it is a design without predefined outcomes), the configuration of platforms are neither static nor the same in all places: it is also a matter of economic, political and cultural influence, which all taken together provide a direction for the actions taken.

For centuries, social networks have been deemed to play a significant role in conflicts relating to power sharing. This role has been unquestionable since these networks are embedded in the social structure of all human societies. However, what has come under scrutiny is the scope of influence a particular network possesses to alter the balance of power among given actors. While many factors could be used to measure network effectiveness in the sphere of power



struggles, this paper argues that the type of technology, the social structure and the resilience of agent experiences are the most crucial ones.

Power Centers and the Shift in Functionality

The paper argues that whether a network functions as a platform for liberation or repression depends on the power centers within a given society or environment. This means that whilst the network plays a role in enacting and shifting power, the direction of these shifts is determined by the power stakeholders, in addition to the nature and the maturity of the technology used as the medium. The nature and maturity of the technology here depend on the characteristics of its design and the development of its integration as a socio-technological platform. The theme of power here can be best understood when power is conceptualized as a social construct that can be changed once its infrastructure is altered. Undeniably, technology as a platform for the direction of social forces is consequently a platform for power. In this sense, social networks can both be agents that can distribute power and the infrastructure for power shifts themselves. More concretely, if authoritarian regimes have an upper hand over pro-democratic civil movements, network structures would be used as a tool of repression. However, if these movements gain power at a time when regimes feel vulnerable, these networks could become infrastructures for liberation and emancipation.

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With the advent of Web 2.0 in late 1999, the Internet took on a new dimension where social actors exploited its new structure and applications for shaping and reshaping the power systems of society. Web 2.0 represented a new generation of the Internet, described as a “writable” version of the World Wide Web. Unlike Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is interactive and more dynamic: i.e., its design created opportunities through these spaces of freedom and was therefore deployed in an unpredictable way.

Consequently, Web 2.0 allows users to interact and collaborate freely with others and with the web itself, sharing information online via social media, blogging and Web-based communities. In Web 2.0, applications such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr came to prominence. However, while allowing for a multiplicity of unpredictable free usages of the Internet, its design also helped to standardize interactions and create value for the mediators of the platform, opening up many new possibilities.

It could be argued that the Middle East is probably the first region to have been subjected to the full effects of Web 2.0. It was clear that by the end of the 2000s, the political and regional structure in the Middle East was stumbling. Generally speaking, the constant instability of the region derived from both internal and external factors. Externally, there was the War on Terror, which led to the Iraqi invasion by a U.S.-led alliance, dividing Arab countries into two camps: the reformists who took the U.S. side and the resisters who stood against the U.S. This war, in addition to the dual Israeli wars



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on Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008, proved how far Arab regimes lacked the strategic sufficiency to deal with external penetration into their local affairs, which led in the end to many inter-Arab confrontations. Internally, Arab regimes failed to match their people's hopes and needs. Political stagnation, economic decline and an increasing rate of repression, to mention but a few issues, paved the way for social unrest, political instability and mass mobilization which shook the ground under the feet of their authoritarian rulers.

Given these circumstances, the official Arab regimes felt vulnerable to the continual pressure from an anger populace who were increasingly becoming more confident in their demands for power-sharing.

Within this context, Web 2.0 deployed its full weight. It was fully engaged in the political conflict between the regimes involved and anti-state actors. Throughout the unfolding of events, however, the web played the roles of tool and agent interchangeably, without leaving its role of instrumental functionality. In fact, the story of social media platforms became a story of freedom, control, and unpredictability.

To clarify our argument, we divided the period of regional instability into two phases: Phase One during the public demonstrations which began from the early 2000s and reached their peak with

the Arab Spring, and Phase Two with the counter-demonstrations which began with the military coup in Egypt in 2013 to the present day.

Phase One: Popular Strength and Regime Vulnerability

During the first phase, these networks showed their positive side, with anti-state actors exploiting their uses to raise their voices. So-called Web-enthusiasts such as Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky argued optimistically that they empowered people by providing them with "powerful, speedy, and relatively low-cost tools for recruitment, fund-raising, the distribution of information and images, collective discussions and mobilization for action".¹⁹

The liberatory sides of social networks were observed when pro-democratic protests began taking place in some semi-democratic countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Kuwait. The anti-state protesters gained an advantage over regimes facing structural vulnerabilities. The role of platforms here can be understood through the behaviors they made possible for anti-state actors: the pro-democracy freedom fighters used these networks to make a breakthrough mainly in three precise areas: agenda-setting; alliance-like intergroup cooperation and overcoming rigid state control of the media.

Agenda Setting

Joseph Nye, the author of "The Future of Power", describes three faces of power: commanding change, controlling agendas, and establishing preferences.²⁰ What is important to our argument here is the second face, which relates to the



When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and protests broke out in Tunisia, it was easy for the regime to denounce the events and call the protesters savages. But the mass of photos, videos and posts that spread like wildfire across social media deprived the regime of its deniability about what was really happening on the ground

dimension of framing and agenda-setting. In Nye's words "if ideas and institutions can be used to frame the agenda for action in a way that make other's preferences seem irrelevant or out of bounds, then it may never be necessary to push or shove them".²¹

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The protesters set the agenda. The goal was clear: to topple the authoritarian regime and open the door for a democratic transition. The protesters scored a great success in this regard. Their story won. The world was observing the situation closely and could only one choose to follow. For example, in his remarks on the Middle East and North Africa on May 19, 2011, President Barack Obama said clearly that "We face a historic opportunity. We have the chance to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator."²²

Alliance-like Intergroup Cooperation:

With tensions between the regimes and other segments of society rising, a growing number of social movements were being founded. The backbone of these movements was both factory laborers and well-educated young people. Many of these movements were established on online platforms, such as the April 6 Movement in Egypt, which began as a simple Facebook page calling on protesters in Cairo to support a planned workers' protest in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra. In the same token, the Orange Movement in Kuwait began in 2006 with a blog that at the time provided news on the succession crisis when the tradition media did not.

In Kuwait particularly, the proliferation of social movements made up of young people went side by side with the distribution of the Internet in the country. Kuwait was and still considered one of the top countries by Internet penetration. As of 2014, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimates that more than 78 percent percent of people in Kuwait use the internet. This is an increase from 28 percent in 2006 and 50.8 percent in 2009.

Most of the Kuwaiti prominent anti-state movements were established between 2009 and 2013, including al-Sur al-khamis (the Fifth Fence), Kafi (Enough), Hamlat Nurid (the We Want campaign), Shabab al-Hurriyya (the Youth of Freedom) and Shabab al-Taghyir wa-l-Tatwir. Initially these movements were working in an isolated and insular way. However, the online platforms took their messages viral within society, enabling them to co-operate across traditional boundaries.



The gatherings on these platforms paved the way for young activists to meet, discuss, and exchange experience. It was only a short time before this kind of online grouping materialized in an offline alliance.

On 27 and 28 February of 2012, the founding conference of the youth movement was held following a call from various organizations.²³ The outcome of the conference was a birth of a political movement called al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya al-Madaniyya (Hadam, or the Civilian Democratic Movement), whose contribution to political dynamics in Kuwait has been unquestionable.

Overcoming Rigid State Control of Traditional Media

Again, Nye argues in his book that the “conventional wisdom has always held that the state with largest military prevails, but in an information age it may be the state (or non-state) with the best story that wins”. The protesters in the street no longer needed the traditional media, which was in any event strictly controlled by the state, to tell their story to the world. With blogging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and most importantly the smartphone, which provided every single protester with a camera and turned them into independent journalists. The interactivity of Web 2.0 enabled protesters to create their own stories which went viral across social media and beyond.

The new media put both the regimes and the traditional media in a dilemma. On the one hand, the regimes found that it was not possible to cut off Internet service for the entire country since this move would damage the country's

With blogging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and most importantly the smartphone, which provided every single protester with a camera and turned them into independent journalists. The interactivity of Web 2.0 enabled protesters to create their own stories which went viral across social media and beyond

economy. On the other hand, traditional media found that joining social media was the only way to survive in financial and audience terms. As Nordenson has argued, “Egyptian newspapers started to use blogs as a source on a more regular basis, not just in specific, high visible cases.”²⁴

Moreover, on contrast to those who argued that the traditional media was obsolete, there were forms of integration between the new and traditional media such as TV channels. When the Egyptian security forces entered Tahrir Square one night in the early stages of the revolution and broke up the gathering with batons and tear gas, “the attack was far from being secret; smartphone cameras captured the attack and the videos were uploaded to YouTube and broadcast on Al Jazeera”²⁵. (89)

Phase Two: The Counter Revolutionaries are Coming

On the other hand, so-called Web-skeptics such as Baogang He, Mark E. Warren and Evgeny Morozov argued that the new information and communication technology had negative effects on social emancipation. The negative side effects of the platforms network can be tracked in two different spaces. Firstly, the Internet gives people a false sense of participation and can keep them away from actual physical protesting. Secondly, the Internet is being used by different authoritarian



regimes as a tool of repression and control.²⁶

The negative side of these networks became very clear in the second phase of the period of instability, when the pro-democracy protesters were crushed brutally by the regimes and consequently the regional centers of power shifted from semi-democratic states such as Egypt and Kuwait to absolute authoritarian ones such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

If social media was deployed massively in the first phase for liberation purposes, in the second phase, on the contrary, it was used for repression. In other words, the digital interactive infrastructure and software of Web 2.0 “have contributed to the empowerment of pro-democracy movements and the entrenchment of civil society, on the one hand; and have helped refine the powers and practices for exercising censorship and surveillance by non-democratic regimes, on the other hand.”²⁷ Hussain’s argument here emphasizes the interdependence of these platforms’ characteristics. The free spaces for communication and content creation are dominated by the design that standardizes them, aggregates and delivers their value to an eventual controller.

In fact, while the countries of the early Arab Spring revolutions such as Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen suffered from major disturbances, either because of uprisings, civil strife, or democratic transformation, some other countries, especially oil-rich monarchies in the Arabian Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, were watching the scene closely and anxiously. The rulers of these countries realized how

these digital networks were powerful for mobilizing the masses, spreading ideas and setting the social agendas that were shaking up the stability of existing regimes. They understood that buying their peoples’ silence with huge subsidies was not enough. What was therefore urgently necessary in their point of view was to take countermeasures using the same platforms, but in a different way: surveillance, control, and repression.

Tightening the Law on Internet Use

The Arab Gulf monarchies then tightened their laws on internet use. They now show no tolerance for those who criticize their regimes using social media platforms. In these countries, it has become a criminal offence to deride or damage the state or its institutions or to organize unauthorized protests. The UAE authorities, for example, have detained and arrested many online activists, including Saeed Majed Alshaer al-Shamsi, who possessed a Twitter account, @weldbudhabi, with more than 11,000 followers, 18-year-old blogger Mohammed Salem al-Zumer, and the prominent activist Ahmed Mansoor who was sentenced to 10 years in jail and fined 1 million AED (\$272,000) on charges of criticizing the United Arab Emirates government on social media.

Recently, in a stunning long report, Reuters revealed the secret of Project Raven, a “clandestine team that included more than a dozen former U.S. intelligence operatives recruited to help the United Arab Emirates engage in surveillance of other governments, militants and human rights activists critical of the monarchy”²⁸.



Surveillance

Broadly speaking, surveillance is one of the major methods that authoritarian governments use to track down and beat the opponents. It is also an important means of placing people under constant control and supervision to keep them obedient. Interestingly, it could be argued that there is probably a cyber-alliance taking place between some Arab Gulf monarchs and Israel. Although it is still too early to offer concrete evidence on the formation of such a cyber-alliance, recent revelations about some sort of cooperation among these governments has unmasked some of the truth.

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The New York Times reported on December 2, 2018 that a Saudi dissident and social media activist named Omar Abdulaziz “close to the murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi has filed a lawsuit charging that an Israeli software company helped the royal court take over his smartphone and spy on his communications with Mr. Khashoggi”²⁹.

An Israeli company named the NSO Group produced a piece of spyware known as Pegasus that gives its users a secret way to listen to calls, record keystrokes, read messages, and track the internet history on a targeted phone. Moreover, it

t also enables customers to use a phone’s microphone and camera as surveillance devices. Given its powerful possible uses, the Israeli government classified Pegasus as a cyber weapon.

Abdulaziz was notified by a research group at the University of Toronto that studies online surveillance that his phone might have been hacked. “The research group, Citizen Lab, later concluded that the Saudi government was behind it.” Abdulaziz was a very close friend of Khashoggi, who was killed and dismembered in October 2018 in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. It was believed that one of the conversations that was hacked and played a role in carrying out this crime was about the campaign both men had intended to establish in order to counter online propaganda by the Saudi government. According to the New York Times, Khashoggi had sent Abdulaziz \$5,000 to subsidize that effort.³⁰

Arrests over Posts

It might be argued that the most obvious example of Saudi Arabia trying to dissuade people from criticizing them on social media has been the arrest of many Saudi scholars and clerics, especially since Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman took office. Relying on nominal pretexts such as counterterrorism, the Saudi government adopted several mechanisms in order to prosecute free expression on social media.

Salman al-Ouda, the most prominent among these detainees, was arrested in 2017. He was very active on social media with 14 million followers on Twitter. It was believed that the direct reason behind his arrest was his final post on Twitter, when he prayed for God to “harmonize their hearts for the good of their people” over a telephone call



between Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss ways to resolve the rift between their countries. The news of al-Ouda's arrest went viral and a hashtag in Arabic about his arrest became one of the top trending hashtags worldwide. Al-Ouda is still in jail. His health has been deteriorating, and Saudi public prosecutors are seeking the death penalty for him.

Cybercrime Laws

It is worth also mentioning controversial cybercrime laws in different authoritarian Arab countries. In a long and well-detailed report by Chatham House under the title "Cybercrime Legislation in the GCC Countries: Fit for Purpose?", the author, Joyce Hakmeh, argues that "most cybercrime laws of the GCC countries could put in jeopardy the right to free speech and are at odds with international human rights law, standards and safeguards".

For its part, Egypt has a very dark record in responding to online activities. According to Amnesty International, at least 240 members of political and youth groups in 17 cities were arrested between April and September 2017 for criticizing President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on social media³¹. In August 2018, Sisi signed the Law on Combating Cybercrimes. Under this law, a personal social media account, blog or website with more than 5,000 followers could be considered a media outlet and subject to media law. Popular accounts on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms would be subjected to account removal, fines, and imprisonment if found to be spreading false news. The law also punishes individuals who visit banned websites with up to one year in prison. The creators or managers of websites that are

later banned could face up to two years in prison.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, understanding the transformative effect of new technologies on social life has become equally urgent for social actors across all industries and sectors: academics, decisions makers, governments, and societies at large. Specifically, communication technologies, as a substantive part of everyday life, have reorganized societies, creating a drastic social, economic and political impact. In this context, the Arab Spring is considered to be a turning point, as it was understood to be a direct effect of social media networks. The fundamental changes in forms of political organization since then have emphasized the role of technology not as a tool, but as an autonomous actor. In order to illustrate the role of technology as such, this paper proposed a design-focused framework to examine political change in the Middle East starting with the spread of Web 2.0 and the liberation movements aided by social media platforms to the following authoritarian backlashes. Ultimately, this paper aims to draw the reader's attention to the necessity of a more accurate understanding of the social dynamics enacted within socio-technological platforms and how power can be created, distributed and altered therein. The information technology within this structural context alters the meaning of subjectivity, whereby agency is not restricted to humans but is also taken on by technological innovations such as digital platforms which perform their subjectivity in deconstructing and reconstructing the identity of different actors and altering their perceptions as well.



Endnotes

* This essay is a spin-off from a larger piece, as yet unpublished, about the MENA region's increasingly intersecting conflicts; some text may overlap. Views expressed herein are entirely my own.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nabeel Odeh is a political researcher and opinion columnist. He works at TRT as a Senior Producer. His work is concerned with global affairs, foreign policy analysis, and digital politics. He is a regular TV commentator and lecturer. He is a Ph.D. Candidate in International Relations in Kadir Has University.

Ikbal Ben Gaied Hassine is a research assistant at the Grantham Research Institute and at the Overseas Development Institute. In her postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science she focused her research on the social and economic impact of computerization. She did her undergraduate degree in Business Management and Information Systems.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No.:68 34197 Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org



The Middle East as the First Battlefield of Web 2.0

This paper looks at the fundamental characteristics of the design of technology platforms in an attempt to shed light on the way technological infrastructure (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) can be used by political actors to create and exert power. Platforms, by design, allow for fluid and dynamic forms of organization, providing the infrastructure for socio-technical networks that can operate simultaneously as value-neutral or value-laden tools. Moreover, due to their dynamic nature, platforms are constantly being shaped by the actors with different capacities, while also shaping them in return. The direction of this change is hard to define, yet an understanding of what their design allows to happen would help provide a better framework for the analysis of this phenomenon and pave the way towards a more understanding to the nature of the social inter-subjectivity between technology and humanity. To this end, this article starts by introducing literature from software studies and design thinking explaining the logic of platforms. Then the article looks at the role of technology in changing the political landscape in the Middle East. Ultimately, this highlights the dynamics whereby actors can manipulate different dimensions and characteristics of platforms design to gain power and make an impact.