

Critical Inquiry

Digital Suspicion, Politics, and the Middle East

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In the wake of the popular revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, much ink was spilled about the political power of digital media as a tool of grassroots mobilizing. Initially, many commentators placed the credit for these uprisings at the feet of social networking – even proposing that Facebook and Twitter, and the mobile technologies that enable them, were somehow naturally suited to the political projects of insurgent social movements (a variant of what is known as the ‘digital democracy’ proposition). Somewhat belatedly, correctives to this narrative began to circulate and take hold; some scholars historicized the protest movements as a means of disputing the story of social media’s centrality, while others sought to temper the celebration of grassroots digitality by reminding us of the flexible nature of these technologies, including the ways they have been employed by dictators and police states as PR platforms, tools for tracking and monitoring political dissidents, and means of counter-insurgency more generally.

Yet what both the digital democracy narrative and its corrective tended to share was a certain myopia around digital media – its workings, circuits, and effects. More often than not, we were instructed by the mainstream Western media, as well as by many academic commentators, to read digital tools as transparent conduits for political ends, even if not always successful ones. Pictures shot by mobile phone were offered to us as strictly evidentiary forms, documents that unproblematically chronicle the political field. In turn, many of us geographically distant from the events in the Middle East were seduced by the al-Jazeera live-stream as we reveled in the virtual ‘being-there’ that new technologies seemed to make possible. What was often missing from these popular conversations and structures of feeling was a sense of the highly mediated nature of the digital sphere itself – mediation which belied the prevailing notion of the evidentiary. Largely banished from popular discussion was a sense of the ways in which the digital documents emanating from Tahrir square, for example (photographs, videos, etc.), were often the subject of considerable negotiation and contention; were implicated in the production of selective truth claims; were themselves subject to aesthetic codes and norms which rendered some political documents intelligible and others unintelligible. Largely missing was a sense of the interpretive communities that these tools and documents produced – and, in turn, the lack of hermeneutic closure that often attended their circulation.

In June of this year, a partial corrective to the narrative of digital transparency came from the blogosphere itself, with the unveiling of a cyberhoax involving Tom MacMaster, a graduate student from Scotland who had masqueraded as a queer blogger from Syria. The blog in question was ‘A Gay Girl in A Damascus,’ and its author identified as Amina Araf, an American Syrian lesbian. The blog had gained a popular following in the midst of the pro-democracy protests in the Middle East, particularly so after a post about Amina’s father bravely confronting Syrian security forces to defend his daughter’s sexuality and political choices. For much of the Western media, seduced by the story of a ‘Facebook revolution’ led by computer-savvy youth, Amina rapidly became the brave face of Syrian protest, hailed as the prototypical ‘new hero’ of this social-media revolution.¹ On the 6th of June, the blog announced Amina’s abduction and possible arrest by the Syrian authorities, her fate unknown. Many western bloggers and Internet activists mobilized in Amina’s support, including active organizing on Twitter (#FreeAmina) and Facebook, the later mobilizing more than 14,000 followers.²

It was with shock that Amina’s supporters read the subsequent ‘revelation and apology’ published by MacMaster, who admitted to employing her alias. Mass media journalists and bloggers labored to make sense of the hoax and its effects: some detoured through the rich history of Internet hoaxes,³ spurring debate about the status of digital documents and cyberactivism alike (asking, is the latter political or artistic expression or both?).⁴ Others wrote about the dangers faced by sexual minorities and other political dissidents in Syria, noting how Internet anonymity is crucial for their protection; many warned about the danger the MacMaster’s hoax posed to the credibility of queer activist communities in the region, on and off-line, now that similar digital documents would be suspected of fraud. A wide range of affective

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¹ Amina’s popularity was also due to her blog’s focus on queer sexualities. As one of the Guardian’s journalists put it ‘A Gay Girl in Damascus is brutally honest, poking at subjects long considered taboo in Arab culture <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/06/gay-girl-damascus-syria-blog>. Not surprisingly, this description fed Western narratives about oppressed Middle Eastern queers requiring salvation from the global north.

² Ethan Zukerman, ‘Understanding #amina’, 13 June 2011, <http://www.ethanzukerman.com/blog/category/blogs-and-bloggers/>. Last accessed on 25 July, 2011

³ See, for example, ‘Famous internet hoaxes’, *The Telegraph*, 13 June 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet/8571780/Famous-internet-hoaxes.html>). Last accessed on 25 July, 2011.

⁴ See responses to Ethan Zukerman’s entry <http://www.ethanzukerman.com/blog/2011/06/13/understanding-amina/#comments>. Last accessed on 25 July, 2011.

responses followed from the cybercommunities who had followed Amina's blog and had rallied in the face of her supposed abduction – from confusion to rage, concern to melancholia. What most responses evidenced was a disconcerting loss of certainty about the digital itself – a sense that the stability and knowability of this sphere, from which the Arab Spring was supposedly born, was now shattered. For many, this loss of digital certainty resonated in both shocking and devastating ways.

Taking our cue from this moment of digital revelation and shock, this essay offers a rethinking of the digital and the assumptions that have been popularly advanced in its name following recent political events in the Middle East. To do so, we turn to our own research on Israeli digital cultures and communities as they intersect with the Israeli military occupation of Palestine, a context in which the narrative of digital democracy – or rather, the proposition that the digital be understood a 'natural' domain for anti-hegemonic politics – is widely embraced as a means to explain activist triumph in the face of repressive state military campaigns. The unproblematic framing of the digital as inherently anti-hierarchical and empowering is troubling, we wish to argue, not merely for the facile cyber-utopianism on which it rests – failing to account for the ways that hegemonic institutions and oppressive regimes marshal new media for their own ends⁵ – but also because it stills the hermeneutic operation within the digital sphere and assumes rather than interrogates the nature of the digital itself. As partial corrective, this essay explores the recurrent narratives of suspicion and disbelief that circulate within this Israeli digital context, calling digital evidence into question. These narratives of suspicion are highly mobile, and are employed by varying cybercommunities with multiple political aims and effects. At times, suspicion is mobilized to reaffirm and strengthen Israeli state power, militancy and violent patriotism; in other instances, it works to challenge and destabilize the state's hegemonic truth claims, particularly where its military occupation is concerned. We want to propose that suspicion – its political pitfalls notwithstanding – might be rethought as a productive interpretive stance, one with the potential to helpfully destabilize evidentiary claims made in the name of the digital. Suspicion, we proffer, offers a set of critical reading tools with which the Arab Spring qua digital revolution might be reconsidered.

We begin with the cyber-conversations that erupted following the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) attack on the Freedom Flotilla in May-June 2010 – a naval convoy of activists that aimed to break the Israeli siege on Gaza. What followed was a digital PR onslaught by the IDF in an effort to advance the state's official political message and temper international

⁵ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World*, Allen Lane, 2011.

condemnation of Israel – the state’s experience with new media having been honed during the 2008-2009 assault on the Gaza Strip.⁶ YouTube was the IDF’s new media tool of choice, and its video stream was considerable, with over twenty separate videos issued by the army during the first few days following its raid on the convoy – videos which aimed to justify the state’s military rationale and that of the navy blockade more generally.⁷

Among anti-occupation activists working in cybercontexts, this digital campaign raised more questions than it answered about the rationale and conditions of the IDF’s deadly naval raid. Suspicion spiked in the aftermath of the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s release, via Flickr and on social networking sites, of a visual catalogue of ‘weapons’ discovered onboard. Many activist consumers questioned not merely the ‘weaponry’ charge, but also the very status of the digital images, arguing that their time stamp prior to the navy raid pointed to state falsification (‘pro-Israeli’ users countered that IDF cameras had merely been inaccurately set). Soon thereafter, suspicion spiked over the IDF’s YouTube release of a supposed audio transmission between the Israeli Navy and Flotilla activists in the hours before the raid – a transmission in which the voice of supposed Flotilla activists can be heard instructing the IDF to ‘go back to Auschwitz,’ noting that ‘we’re helping Arabs go against the US’. Independent bloggers charged the Israeli army with audio tampering to produce a damning portrait of anti-Semitic Flotilla terrorists in activist garb.⁸ One day later, the IDF Spokesman was forced to issue a ‘correction’ on its webpage, admitting to ‘questions regarding the authenticity of the recording’.⁹ Despite the state’s significant digital presence in this context, and the sheer volume and popularity of its digital output, activists onboard and online claimed a decisive victory in the new media domain – while many state officials privately mourned a colossal PR failure.

⁶ For a more elaborated discussion of this event, and its social media context and history, see Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, ‘Another War Zone: Social Media in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict’, *Middle East Report*, September 2010, <http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/another-war-zone>. Last accessed on 2 June 2011.

⁷ Three of videos ranked among YouTube’s most popular during the first week of June, see Ayala Tsoref, ‘3 Most Viewed Youtube Clips in the World - Posted by Idf’, *Haaretz*, 3 June 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/3-most-viewed-youtube-clips-in-the-world-posted-by-idf-1.293994>. Last accessed on 2 June 2011.

⁸ Max Blumenthal, ‘IDF Releases Apparently Doctored Flotilla Audio; Press Reports As Fact’, 4 June 2010 <http://maxblumenthal.com/2010/06/idf-releases-apparently-doctored-audio-press-reports-as-fact/>. Last accessed on 2 June 2011.

⁹ IDF spokesman, ‘Clarification/Correction Regarding Audio Transmission Between Israeli Navy and Flotilla on 31 May 2010,’ 31 May 2010, <http://idfspokesperson.com/2010/06/05/clarificationcorrection-regarding-audio-transmission-between-israeli-navy-and-flotilla-on-31-may-2010-posted-on-5-june-2010/>. Last accessed on 2 June 2011.

Suspicion of a very different sort would attend a video posted on YouTube in the summer of 2010, entitled ‘Soldiers Dance in Hebron.’ It depicts a six-man unit of armed IDF soldiers patrolling the deserted streets of downtown Hebron in the occupied West Bank – their seemingly standard patrol suddenly giving way to a synchronized dance routine to the music of American pop singer Ke\$ha.¹⁰ With the music’s cessation, the soldiers return to their patrol in streets rendered empty of their Palestinian residents by Israel’s highly restrictive occupation policy. Once discovered by the military via the mainstream Israeli media, the video was removed from YouTube; in tandem, the IDF issued a hurried statement explaining the video as an aberrant joke and promising a careful investigation. But, true to YouTube popular conventions, the clip was promptly posted again under different headings and soon went viral, stirring heated debates; spoofs and remakes proliferated on popular Israeli comedy shows, whose viewers were invited to produce their own remix. Dozens would eventually make their way to YouTube.

The original video generated little agreement among interpretive communities in Israel and abroad. Some journalists and Internet commentators found it deeply disturbing – an embodiment in popular cultural form, they proposed, of the everyday cruelty of Israeli military occupation; echoing the defense of its makers, others read it as innocently playful or a richly intertextual comedic spoof¹¹; some, particularly members of the armed services in Israel and elsewhere, praised the text as tension relief for stressed and terrified 18-year olds in a military zone. The video’s actual coordinates and truth claims were also questioned: some users expressed doubts over its location – whether it had been shot in Hebron or was digitally modified to appear as such; other queried the status of the accompanying music, whether it had been played on site, in real time, or was added after the shooting. These variable readings echoed those proffered following the viral circulation of the Iranian video of Neda Agha-Soltan, concurrently read as heart-breaking testimony, Internet hoax, and snuff movie.¹²

¹⁰ The Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* remarked that ‘the coordinated performance appears to indicate the soldiers rehearsed the dance for some time.’ Anshel Pfeffer, ‘Soldiers to Face Punishment for YouTube Video of Hebron Boogie,’ *Ha’aretz*, 6 July, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/soldiers-to-face-punishment-for-youtube-video-of-hebron-boogie-1.300241> Last accessed on 2 June 2011.

¹¹ A popular remake of a Lady Gaga video by American soldiers in Afghanistan was among those precedents cited.

¹² Neda Agha-Soltan was a young Iranian woman who took part in street protests in Teheran after the 2009 elections, shot by a member of the Iranian militia, her last moments captured on a bystander’s mobile phone. For a detailed and insightful analysis of the video’s multiple readings see Terri Senft, ‘Sex, spectatorship, and the “Neda” video: a biopsy,’ *New Visualities, New Technologies: The New Ecstasy of Communication*, Hille Koskela and J. Macgregor Wise, Blackwell. Forthcoming 2011.

In the Israeli context, digital suspicion is not limited to YouTube videos, nor to celebratory portrayals of IDF violence. For internet users on the political right, digital testimonies of the Palestinian suffering attract the most popular disbelief. A different type of suspicion is evident in these cases – one whose origins lie less in hybrid genres or multiple interpretive possibilities, but in the politics of suffering itself. Such suspicion was particularly rampant during the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, when hundreds of photographs of Gazan death and destruction circulated on transnational social networks – images that ran contrary to the national media’s almost exclusive focus on Israeli victimology. Many Israeli consumers of these images queried not merely the story they told, but their authenticity as digital sources. Some argued passionately that they were the product of Palestinian or anti-Semitic European propaganda; others proposed that they had been staged or photoshopped to inflate the magnitude of Gazan suffering. This ‘paranoid reading’, to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words,¹³ was particularly prevalent among self-proclaimed experts – those computer-savvy Internet users, often militantly patriotic, who trumpeted their ability to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘doctored’ digital evidence on the basis of both ethno-national and technological clues.

This discourse of suspicion over the veracity of digital footage from Palestine is frequently directed towards Israeli human rights activists and NGOs, particularly those who employ video, shared via social networks and video sharing platforms, to present their evidence. In the last few years, as the Israeli intolerance for the discourse of human right grows, the Israeli NGO B’tselem¹⁴ has increasingly been targeted by such suspicion campaigns. In 2007, B’tselem launched their ‘Shooting Back’ project which delivered hundreds of hand-held video cameras, and rudimentary training in camera usage, to Palestinian families in besieged areas of the occupied West Bank such that they could document their frequent abuse at the hands of soldiers and neighboring settler populations. It is the rare video which has not been met by charges of video tampering and fraud, particularly among right wing Internet activists – even those videos in which scenes of violence against Palestinians have been bolstered by plentiful evidence. Such a suspicion campaign followed the July 2008 shooting, at close range, of a bound and blindfolded Palestinian detainee by an Israeli soldier in the West Bank

¹³ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 123-51. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003

¹⁴ The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, <http://www.btselem.org/>. Last accessed on 25 July, 2011.

village of Ni'lin – a scene captured by a young Palestinian B'tselem volunteer who filmed the incident from the window of her adjacent home. While some Israeli journalists praised B'tselem for release of this 'extraordinary footage' – footage that conformed to YouTube visual protocols of amateur production, replete with shaking camera and poor framing – right wing bloggers charged the organization with doctoring and editing the filmic evidence for political aims. Its fraudulence was clearly manifest, they claimed, in blurry images, sudden cuts and manifest omissions in the filmic narrative, and damning 'black spots'.¹⁵ So pervasive was this narrative of fraudulent digital modification as it to see its unfold within the military courtroom during the trial of the soldiers involved, where expert witnesses were called to assess the veracity of the footage. While the court eventually 'rejected the claim that the video footage of the event had been falsified',¹⁶ the narrative of digital tampering remained persuasive among right-wing detractors.

What do these digital documents, and attendant controversies, tell us? The clashing interpretations with which the documents are met – interpretations that multiply via viral circulation across multiple sites, contexts, and audiences – complicate any presumption of digital self-evidence. Their frequently hybrid genre makes the labor of categorization even more difficult. The footage of the dancing soldiers, for example – and to some extent, that of B'tselem, too – could be read as part documentary, part amateur cinema, part home video, part political testimony (a hybridity also shared by the viral Neda video of 2009). This hybridity is exacerbated when authors and origins cannot be verified and then are speculatively attributed – a problem particularly prevalent with the YouTube platform. Offering little certainty, these documents thus raise more questions than they answer: of what are they evidence? To what do they testify or bear witness? The repressive hand of the state? The power of popular culture to strengthen or, via parody, unsettle state authority? To the naked suffering that gives a human face to grand political narratives of occupation, resistance or war? Or to the seduction of digital militainment that makes all bleeding bodies into avatars?

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¹⁵ Quoted on "Evening with Rafi Reshef", Israel's Channel 10. 5 August, 2008.

¹⁶ B'tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, http://www.btselem.org/firearms/20110127_nilin_shooting_sentence. Last accessed on 25 July, 2011.

Evident in all of the examples we have presented in our discussion is the recurrent mobilization of the language of suspicion – about the possibility of photoshopped images, about manipulated videos, or about staged performances. When coupled with the scrupulous interpretive practices that attend these narratives, the phenomenon might be more precisely framed as what others critics have termed, in different contexts, *a hermeneutics of suspicion*.¹⁷ What we have in mind here is at once a reading practice, a form of knowledge, and a structure of feeling. As in the Israeli example, digital suspicion has no single political valence, nor does it yield singular effects. Rather, it is highly mobile, contingent, and variable in form and function – always working in articulation with the particular actors or communities that employ it, and in concert with the political moment from which it emerges. Of course, suspicion and paranoia are by no means new phenomenon, neither to the media field, nor to Israeli political and military theaters.¹⁸ In the Israeli context, suspicion as an interpretive practice has a long and enduring history, particularly with regards to Palestinian political claims – a practice rehearsed most frequently and forcefully where 1948 is concerned, what most Israelis call the ‘war of independence’ and Palestinians, the *Nakba* or catastrophe. What is new in the present political moment are the ways that these historically recalcitrant discourses of disbelief couple with the technological realities of the contemporary digital media moment – couplings which breed new forms of knowledge, new structures of feeling, new kinds of interpretive communities, and, in turn, new political possibilities for state institutions and activists alike.

Consider, again, the examples of digital suspicion explored in this essay. Read together, the variability of ‘suspicion’ as an interpretive position becomes abundantly clear. Some such positions were ostensibly motivated by a desire for ‘true stories’; while others carried a more explicit ideological charge. Some suspicions functioned as anti-hegemonic practices, as in the activist challenge to doctored Flotilla video, in which the language of doubt and disbelief became a tool by which to challenge state justifications of its military project – an outcome

¹⁷ We are borrowing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s retooling of a phrase by Paul Ricoeur. Sedgwick deploys the formulation to identify the ‘critical habits’ of New Historicist, deconstructive, feminist, queer and psychoanalytic criticism of her moment. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.’ In *Touching Feeling : Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 123-51. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

¹⁸ For a detailed account of the history of ‘paranoid’ readings in the American political context, see Richard Hofstadter, ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’, *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964, pp. 77-86, http://karws.gso.uri.edu/jfk/conspiracy_theory/the_paranoid_mentality/the_paranoid_style.html. Last accessed 14 August 2011.

made possible by the availability of multiple sources of Internet-based information on the military raid, including the testimonies of Flotilla activists, alternative footage of the raid, and vibrant on-line discussions the itself. In other instances, however, suspicion worked to reaffirm dominant nationalist politics of victimhood, with its sharp distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives,¹⁹ between 'real' suffering (reserved for Jewish Israelis) and what was deemed the feigned protestations of Palestinians. In these cases, suspicion enacted a form of political and epistemic violence that was enabled by its depoliticized façade, masked by seemingly 'neutral' notions of computer savvy and technical knowledge. Here, suspicion was often articulated through distinction: not merely which photo is real and which is not, but through deployment of chilling 'expertise' regarding which dead bodies were authentic and which digitally manipulated or staged. Such was the case with photos from the 2008-2009 Israeli incursion into Gaza, in which suspicion about Palestinian suffering – often cast in the language of the photoshop – functioned as an effective tool of militant patriotism and dehumanization of the 'enemy'. So, too, in the case of B'tselem's videos, in which suspicion feeds a national culture committed to exculpating Israeli state violence against Palestinians, on the one hand, and discrediting human rights discourse and practices, on the other. A substitution principal was often at work in these instances, by which the charge of digital tampering became a means by which to indict one's political foes in other terms – through the language of technology rather than politics.

Regardless of their political valence, these practices of digital suspicion rarely lead to resolution. This lack of resolution is of particular concern to activists and human rights workers, particularly those working in cyber contexts, who worry that the perceived loss of solid 'facts', 'evidence' and 'verification' not only complicates claims regarding human rights violations, but can lead to paralysis and withdrawal from on-line political theaters altogether (this fear was frequently voiced in the aftermath of Amina's unmasking). This worry is shared by professional journalists who fear damaging changes to professional codes of ethics and the erosion of traditional verification strategies in times when every blogger can be a journalist, and every digital document can be claimed as evidence. When confronted with digital documents suspected or branded as doctored, cyberpublics in Israel and elsewhere now frequently respond with a melancholic mourning over the presumed certainty of the digital – certainty in which many producers and consumers of digital media are deeply invested.

¹⁹ Butler, Judith, *Prekarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, New York: Verso, 2004 and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, London: Verso, 2009.

The scale and importance of such concerns, coupled with the damage that suspicion can and has wrought in political theaters both on and off-line, must not be ignored. Yet, what of the other outcomes that suspicion might yield? Attention to the polyvalent field of suspicion, we want to suggest, might aid in a productive rethinking of the domain of the digital itself, a rethinking particularly urgent given the largely uncritical and frequently utopian readings of new media that emerged during the Arab spring. Suspicion as an interpretive practice does much to trouble these readings, challenging presumptions of the digital as necessarily instrumental, knowable and transparent, and pointing to the complexity, and sometimes irresolvability that attends digital documents. Countering collective melancholia over the loss of the ‘real’ in cyberspace, practices of suspicion draws our attention to the digital as a site for making and remaking ‘evidence,’ biographies, and testimonials; a place of fierce negotiation and contestation over interpretations; a material-semiotic²⁰ relations where bodies and data bleed into each other; a discursive field in which politics is often conducted in other terms – via the language of technology.

This leaves us with is a very different set of questions where political events in the Middle East are concerned. Instead of querying the degree to which digital media creates a new arsenal of political tools for states and/or citizens, we might reorient our focus: What kinds of politics, we might ask, are possible in a digital field saturated by suspicion, interpretive polyvalence, and evidentiary uncertainty? What kinds of political avenues and outcomes might be opened, even as others are foreclosed, by the work that suspicion does? Some of the answers were offered in the aftershock of Amina’s story: alongside the very real concerns and collective mourning it engendered were a set of highly generative debates – ones about the multiple meanings and possibilities which the Internet made available, about the political forces that structure those possibilities, and about the responsibility that attends their interpretation.

²⁰ Donna Haraway, *Modest _ Witness@Second_Millennium: FemaleMan _ Meets _ OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, New York: Routledge, 1997.