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## FCJ-146 Mannheim's Paradox: Ideology, Utopia, Media Technologies, and the Arab Spring

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### Introduction

This article explores the complicated historical relationship between ideology and utopia in European thought, and what this relationship can teach us when faced with the exuberant promises that characterise much new media discourse. Discussion is divided into two parts. The first develops a detailed account of how this pairing of ideology and utopia has been theorised in the influential (if contentious) earlier work of Karl Mannheim, and how the work and ideas of Mannheim have been taken up (and critiqued) by more recent critics, including Paul Ricoeur, among others. The second then uses the example of the use of social and other media technologies during the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2010-2011 as a basis from which to consider how applicable these twin ideas of ideology and utopia are to an examination of media technologies and the discourses that attend and structure our engagements with them. The paper concludes by considering the potentially productive theoretical possibilities that continue to be found in engaging with ideology and utopia in critical examinations of media technologies and cultures.

### Karl Mannheim on Ideology and Utopia

The idea of utopia has a long and rich history. While it was popularised by Thomas More (2010) in his *Utopia* (first published 1516), the concept is much older (Sargent 2000: 8), stretching back via Plato (Pradeau, 2000) to Biblical Edenic times (Lecoq and Schaer, 2000) – and forward to

the present, despite various claims of its death in the face of postmodernity (Jacoby, 1999). One dominant conception of utopia is as referring to a perfect yet imagined place or state of things. This is the result of a playful elision on the part of Thomas More, with the title of his book containing a deliberate ambiguity: is it eutopia (from the Greek *eu*, well or pleasing, and *topos*, place) or is it outopia (a combination of the Greek *ou*, not, and *topos*, place, meaning 'no-where' or 'no-place') (Levitas, 1990: 2; Doxiadis, 1966: 88)? Utopias, according to this view, thus belong 'exclusively neither to the realm of the imagination nor to that of reality' (Donskis, 1997: 136). Rather, utopias exist in a kind of liminal space or middle ground, somewhere between the real or realisable and the imaginary or impossible (Ricoeur 1986: 301). This tension is commonly regarded as one of the constitutive features of all utopias, and is presumably what the Canadian literary critic Donald Theall was alluding to when he once spoke of utopia's 'ambivalences'.

A key strand of utopian scholarship concerns the (broadly Marxist) interest in negotiating the relationship between *ideology* and *utopia*. Perhaps the best-known (and certainly the most controversial) examination of the relationship between ideology and utopia is Karl Mannheim's influential study, *Ideology and Utopia* (1966, first published in German in 1929 and in English in 1936). Before moving to an examination of this text, it is worth beginning with a more general account of ideology and utopia. To give one example, according to utopian studies scholar Lyman Tower Sargent, ideology can, in broad terms, be understood to refer to:

*a system of values and beliefs regarding the various institutions and processes of society that is accepted as fact or truth by a group of people. An ideology provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and, in doing so, organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable. (Sargent cited in Sargent, 2006: 12)*

Building on this definition, Sargent writes that, 'as such, every ideology contains a utopia, and the problem with utopia arises when it becomes a system of beliefs rather than what it is in almost all cases, a critique of the actual through imagining a better alternative' (2006: 12).

I offer this definition in order to establish the distinctiveness of Mannheim's take on these ideas, especially with respect to the concept of utopia. Mannheim has developed a very particular (some might say, peculiar) understanding of ideology and utopia and the interactions between them.

According to Mannheim's formulation, 'both ideologies and utopias are ideas' (Levitas, 1990: 68), and are ideas which are 'incongruous with the state of reality within which [they] occur' (Mannheim, 1966: 173). The key point of difference between them is based on their respective social functions: ideologies work to sustain the present state of things; while utopias serve to bring about change. As Mannheim writes:

*Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at that time. In limiting the meaning of the term "utopia" to that type of orientation which transcends reality and which at the same time breaks the bonds of the existing order, a distinction is set up between the utopian and the ideological states of mind. (Mannheim, 1966: 173)*

For Mannheim, then, form and content are not crucial elements of utopia, as they are in the 'liberal humanist tradition' (Levitas, 1990: 68). Rather, for Mannheim, what is most crucial is utopia's transformative function; utopia is, in short, a 'reality-transcending' (Turner, 2003: 33) idea that has the potential to 'break the bonds of the existing social order' (Mannheim, 1966: 173).

It is a formulation that is quite different from the view which labels as utopian that which 'can in principle never be realized' (Mannheim, 1966: 176-177). Mannheim has no truck with this position. 'Wishful thinking has always figured in human affairs', he writes. 'When the imagination finds no satisfaction in existing reality, it seeks refuge in wishfully constructed places and periods' (1966: 184).[1] One of Mannheim's key contributions to utopian thought, then, is to reconfigure the concept of utopias 'to mean those ideas that have some hope of prospect of realization' (Kumar, 2006: 174).

Underpinning Mannheim's model is an alignment between ideology and utopia and distinct social strata or classes: 'ideology is linked to dominant but declining classes, utopia to oppressed (or at least subordinate) and rising ones' (Levitas, 1990: 74-75). Thus, the larger argument of Mannheim's analysis of ideology and utopia can be summarised as follows. In contrast to ideologies which 'express the world view or perspective of a dominant group or class :

*Utopias [...] are the belief systems or world views of groups which are excluded from a full realization of their socio-economic interests. Utopias outline and indicate a future alternative social order which is oriented towards their specific interests.*

*Political culture is the oscillation and conflict which takes place between these total world views, representing the interests of diametrically opposed social classes groups. (Turner, 1995: 719)*

For Mannheim, it is only when these 'reality-transcending' ideas or 'wish-images' are taken up by certain (oppressed or subordinate) social groups and are 'embodied [...] into their actual conduct, and [they try] to realize them, [do] these ideologies become utopian' (Mannheim, 1966: 174).

## Response to and Critiques of Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia

At the time of publication, Mannheim's book met with a quite hostile reception (drawing responses from the likes of Bloch, Marcuse, Arendt, Tillich, and Horkheimer, among others) and generating 'bitter dispute about the status of scientific ideas' (Turner, 1995: 721), as well as criticism of Mannheim's position vis-à-vis Marxism (for discussion, see Geoghegan, 2004; Meja and Stehr, 1990).

More recently, detailed consideration has been given to the 'inadequacies and inconsistencies' (Levitas, 1990: 74) that characterise his analysis of ideology and utopia. One such issue is that of how one determines whether these 'wish-images' of the subordinate classes crystallise into utopia, or fall back into becoming part of the prevailing ideology. This determination, Levitas (1990: 70) notes, 'can, as Mannheim recognises, only really be applied with hindsight':

*Ideas which later turned out to have been only distorted representations of a past or potential social order were ideological, while those which were adequately realized in the succeeding social order were relative utopias. (Mannheim, 1966: 184)*

This *ex post facto* determination of what is ideology and what is utopia – the fraught concept of 'realizability', according to which 'what is to be regarded as truly utopian [is that which is] realizable in the future' (Mannheim, 1966: 184) – poses a range of issues.

To begin with, the relationship between cause and effect is not easily established. As Levitas writes, 'to identify an idea as a utopia, we have therefore to establish not only that a change has occurred sufficiently in line with its content, but also that the idea was instrumental in effecting the change' (1990: 76). In practice, however, it is very difficult to do this, 'even with the benefit of hindsight' (76).

In addition, for Geoghegan (2004: 125), a 'past-orientated' conception of ideology, and a 'future-orientated' conception of utopia results in 'a rather one-dimensional, linear conception of the source of ideas'. In short, this 'unilinear and deterministic' (Levitas, 1990: 75) sequencing makes extremely difficult any attempt at determining 'what is utopian and what ideological in contemporary conjunctions' (Geoghegan, 2004: 125). Levitas (1990: 70) notes how, 'in the real world, ideologies may contain utopian elements and utopias may contain ideological ones, so that distinguishing between the two becomes [extremely] difficult'. Moreover, it is a means of delineation which leaves little room for ideas 'which may be neutral, or whose relationship to the present is ambiguous or paradoxical' (1990: 75).

For Geoghegan, a productive alternative (or corrective) to this issue might be found in the work of Ernst Bloch, who is said to dispense with 'Mannheim's rather stark binary distinction between "reality" and the transcendental, incongruent forms of ideology and utopia"' (Geoghegan, 2004: 130). Rather, for Bloch, ideology and utopia are 'deemed to be internal aspects of the movement of reality, informing consciousness and practices' (130); they 'grow out of the same soil, and interpenetrate in the conceptions of the age' (128). This is an especially helpful alternative perspective when it comes to thinking about the relationship of ideology and utopia to media technologies and will be returned to in the later discussion of the 'Arab Spring'.

A further issue with Mannheim's analysis is to be found if we consider the overarching project of his book. According to Levitas, this can be summarised in the following terms: 'all knowledge, and particularly all knowledge of the social world, is partial, selective and dependent upon the social location of the observer' (1990: 80). The difficulty here, she argues, is that it transforms the concept of ideology from 'particular to total and from special to general' (80). One of the implications of this is captured in what Clifford Geertz has famously termed 'Mannheim's Paradox' – a predicament that effectively questions the 'objectivity of sociological knowledge' (Geertz, 1993: 194). As Ricoeur explains:

*Mannheim pushes the concept and the critique of ideology to the point where the concept becomes self-defeating, a stage reached when the concept is extended and universalized such that it involves anyone who claims its use. [...] We speak about ideology, but our speech is itself caught up in ideology (Ricoeur 1986: 159-160).*

This particular dilemma has implications for the discussion of the role of social and other media technologies in the 'Arab Spring' that is to come later. Before turning to consider these implications, however, in the following section consideration will be given to how Mannheim's ideas have been taken up in the work of Paul Ricoeur.

## Ricoeur on Utopia and Ideology, and the Problem of 'Realisability'

A later study that has sought to shed further light on the relationship between utopia and ideology is Ricoeur's (1986) *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, a series of 18 lectures originally delivered at the University of Chicago in the autumn of 1975. Ricoeur's study, which develops a detailed and largely sympathetic but nonetheless still critical treatment of Mannheim's earlier ideas, is of twofold significance to the present discussion. First, he breaks quite dramatically with the conventional Marxist position by rethinking the concept of ideology in non-pejorative terms. Second, he rethinks the relationship between utopia and ideology, as two concepts that are distinct but dialogic, with one working to adjust the other.

According to orthodox Marxist thinking, Ricoeur argues, ideology functions (simultaneously) as 'distortion' (Marx) and as 'legitimation' (Weber).[2] While Ricoeur does not discount either of these two, he argues that they overlay something altogether more fundamental and, indeed, constructive: the need inherent in all societies for 'a certain concept of the self-identity of a group' (Ricoeur 1986: 173). Thus, for Ricoeur, his argument is that ideology is fundamentally *integrative*; it is what preserves order:

*The possibility that rhetoric can be integrative and not necessarily distortive [an idea he draws from the work of Clifford Geertz] leads us to a nonpejorative concept of ideology. If we follow this path, we may then say that there is something irreducible in the concept of ideology. Even if we separate off the two layers of ideology – ideology as distortion and as the legitimation of system of order or power – the integrative function of ideology, the function of preserving an identity, remains. [...] No group and no individual are possible without this integrative function (258).*

It is only subsequent to this, Ricoeur argues, that ideology can function, as it is more conventionally understood, as distortion and as the legitimation of power.

So, if we agree with Ricoeur's argument, and ideology can be taken to be fundamentally

*integrative* (prior to any potential development in other directions), what, then, characterises the relationship of utopia to ideology? The understanding offered by Ricoeur is that ideology is what preserves order; utopia is what shatters order (179). Ricoeur's rationale for the distinction between ideology as maintenance of order and utopia as shattering order is born from his conviction that any 'judgment on an ideology is always the judgment from a utopia' (172). To illustrate this 'break' from ideology by utopia, Ricoeur gives it at least two different configurations. At one point, he draws from his own, earlier studies on literature to build a useful (albeit passing) comparison between ideology and 'picture' and utopia and 'fiction':

*In a sense all ideology repeats what exists by justifying it, and so gives it a picture – a distorted picture – of what is. Utopia, on the other hand, has the fictional power of redescribing life (309-310; cf. 295 & 311).*

At another point, Ricoeur conceives of the two – ideology and utopia – as different approaches to the 'larger role of the imagination in social life' (1986: 265). This constitutes a return to the Marxist problematic of ideology as imagination (271).[3] But in enacting such a return, Ricoeur offers the following refinement, quoted here in full so as to reveal the nuances of his position and the potential that takes this thinking beyond a simple order/shattered order dichotomy:

*On the one hand, imagination may function to preserve an order. In this case the function of the imagination is to stage a process of identification that mirrors the order. Imagination has the appearance here of a picture. On the other hand, though, imagination may have a disruptive function; it may work as a **breakthrough**. Its image in this case is **productive**, an imagining of something else, the elsewhere. In each of its three roles [integration, distortion, legitimation], ideology represents the first kind of imagination; it has a function of preservation, of conservation. Utopia, in contrast, represents the second kind of imagination; it is always the **glance from nowhere** (1986: 265-266; my emphasis).*

Thus, while there are difficulties with Ricoeur's notion of utopia as enacting a break from ideology (which will be addressed below), there is also great potential for media and cultural studies in his conception of utopia as a disruptive, productive imagining, a breakthrough, or glance from nowhere, as that which 'introduces a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious' (Ricoeur 1986: 299-300). For Ricoeur, the 'utopian mentality' is that which involves 'the effort to convince others, because imagination and not violence must make the break with the past' (287) – an insight that has special resonance in the discussion of social action and new media to follow later. The most fundamental characteristic that structures the relationship

between utopia and ideology, he argues, is a concern for the issue of power. 'My hypothesis', he writes, '[is] that both ideologies and utopias deal with power' (288). Power is also the point of distinction between them: 'ideology is always an attempt to legitimate power, while utopia is always an attempt to replace power with something else' (288) – even if it is a different form of power.

Nonetheless, Ricoeur is under no illusions that counterbalancing ideology (in all its various senses of integration, legitimation, distortion) with utopia does not make for an easy escape from Mannheim's paradox, from the 'oscillation between ideology and utopia' (312). Ricoeur's response to this dilemma is to propose that there is a two-way movement between them, with one correcting the more extreme elements of the other:

*We must try to cure the illnesses of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology – by its element of identity, which is once more a fundamental function of life – and try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element' (312).*

The notion of utopia as a 'cure' to ideology (and vice versa) is an interesting one in that it suggests a certain fluidity or 'play'. Ricoeur extends this understanding of mutual correction to suggest that the 'oscillation between ideology and utopia' (1986: 312) should not be a circle but a spiral. That is, the negotiation of both should be governed by a commitment to some conception of progress; a faith in the future does not negate the challenges of the present. For Ricoeur, it is merely an 'avowal of honesty' to declare such a faith in progress (312); it is also why he maintains that 'we cannot imagine [...] a society without utopia, because this would be a society without goals' (283). Commenting on the work of Mannheim's contemporary, Ernst Bloch, Touraine asks whether such hope need be always future oriented, and whether in fact it is possible 'to combine a principle of hope and a focused attention on the present' (Touraine, 2000: 29). The appeal of such a convergence, he argues, is strong:

*Philosophically, this thought is rich and powerful, since it is located at the juncture of two opposing currents: confidence in progress, and the necessity of the struggle to overcome social constraints (Touraine 2000: 29).*

But, because of this juncture, there is a significant risk attached to such a project, as Ricoeur, in particular, is well aware (see Ricoeur 1986: 312). Negotiating this juncture, and seeking a way to 'understand how the circle can become a spiral' (314) leads Ricoeur to conclude his analysis of ideology and utopia by adopting the notion (borrowed from

Mannheim) of a 'criterion of appropriateness' (313). The need for some sense of determining what is appropriate comes from his argument that 'ideology is finally a system of ideas that becomes obsolete because it cannot cope with the present reality, while utopias are wholesome to the extent that they contribute to the interiorization of changes' (313-314). Thus, while Ricoeur acknowledges this 'criterion is rather difficult to apply' (313), he considers that 'it may be our only alternative' in maintaining a balance between the excesses of both ideology and utopia. It is, he suggests, a question of pragmatics, 'an ability to appreciate what is fitting in a given situation' (314).

Despite its appeal and potential usefulness, the difficulty with Ricoeur's final turn towards the notion of 'appropriateness' is that it is left undeveloped, a cursory conclusion sketched on the last half-a-page of a 314 page text. As a result, it is difficult to determine how this criterion might actually operate or be implemented in practice, particularly in the present context. For example, at what point do changes wrought by utopia become unequivocally 'interiorized'? And how does one determine what 'excess' is and for whom? Who does the deciding? Ricoeur's privileging of 'concrete' utopias and action and his scepticism towards the efficacy of discussion and (poetic) thinking to change things (1986: 298) seem to suggest that utopian 'excess' tends to lie for him with (the admittedly more literary) 'works of fancy, the impossible' (301). The irony of this position is that Ricoeur would, to some extent, thus appear to unwittingly return to the very same concept that he regarded as untenable in Mannheim's theories: the notion of 'realisability'. In a sense, this return is inevitable: any recourse to the notion of practical social and political change in discussions of utopian criticism invokes the spectre of 'realisability'.<sup>[4]</sup>

This issue notwithstanding, what is productive in Ricoeur's engagement with utopia and ideology is his characterisation of utopia as the glance from nowhere (which suggests inventiveness) and the conception of utopia and ideology as mutually correcting (which suggests a certain fluidity or 'play').

Having considered the work of both Mannheim and Ricoeur, in the following section I use this material as a backdrop against which to consider the ongoing merit of, but challenges we face in, engaging critically with these twin ideas of ideology and utopia in unison, and in relation to new media technologies and cultures.

## Media Technologies and the Arab Spring

In the second half of this article, attention will be focused on the use of media technologies, including social media (such as Twitter), in the events associated with the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring ought to be understood as constituting the most recent episode within what is, in fact, a long and complicated historical relationship between utopia and ideology and media and communications technologies (for discussion, see Pippin, 1995). For example, Carey (2009) gives a detailed historical account of ideology in the development and reception of the telegraph. Almost a century later, North American commentary on the early phases of computer-mediated communication and social interaction has been understood as influenced heavily by a particular technological (utopian) imaginary (both scholarly and populist) that has been termed the 'Californian ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron, 2008; Turner, 2006). In addition, the expanding body of scholarship on the electric and digital sublime (Giblett, 2008; Mosco, 2004; Nye, 1994) can also be figured as one which, at its heart, is concerned with exploring and explaining the tensions between utopia and ideology – as can the techno-boosterist hype and promise of technological and cultural transformation that often accompanies the arrival of any new media technology (see, for example, Burgess, 2012).

The analysis that follows further contributes to this rich history. Here the focus is on a consideration of the ideological and utopian dimensions of media technologies as they were taken up and used within events commonly associated with the Arab Spring – events which are of interest for the way that they appear to reflect Mannheim's understanding of ideology and utopia, while raising interesting questions, once again, regarding the fraught issue of utopian 'realisability'. Specifically, here I use the popular idea of a 'Twitter revolution' as a point of departure for a fuller examination of the use of media technologies within the Egyptian context. In building this examination, I draw on popular press reportage of events in Egypt (and elsewhere in the region) and academic analyses by critics with particular expertise in Middle East politics and the media systems of the region.

The term 'Twitter Revolution', apparently coined by Atlantic blogger Andrew Sullivan (Morozov, 2009), was first applied to the Iranian election protests of 2009, and subsequently applied to the revolution in Moldova of the same year (Lysenko and Desouza, 2012), and, alongside related terms such as 'Facebook Revolution', to events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. There has been much debate about the role of technology in realising 'utopian' 'change' in these countries. In some quarters, the notion of a 'Twitter Revolution' has been met with considerable enthusiasm, particularly in the American mainstream press and broadcast media (see, for example, Grossman, 2009; and for discussion, see Else, 2012; 'Tweeting Toward Freedom?', 2011).

There have been a number of explanations for this enthusiasm. One scholarly argument, put forward by Christian Christensen, is that the notion of a 'Twitter Revolution' feeds a particular strand of new media discourse that is concerned with the potential of new media as 'liberation technologies' (see Diamond, 2010) and which posits a causal link (whether implicitly or explicitly) between technology use and the expansion of rights and other forms of economic and social development (Christensen, 2011: 237). Part of the apparent US TV network fascination with the 'Twitter Revolution' idea, it has been suggested, is due to two interconnected factors: (1) newsworthiness ('the International media loves [the] social-networking world' – Mishra quoted in Schectman, 2009); and (2) the networks' own lack of resources ('the international media doesn't have its members on the ground' – Zuckerman quoted in Schectman, 2009). Rich (2011) offers an even more pointed assessment: US TV networks 'can't get enough of this cliché' that social uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa were 'powered by the twin American-born phenomena of Twitter and Facebook' because it validates a 'form of implicit, simplistic Western chauvinism' that delights in the idea 'that two great American digital innovations can rescue the downtrodden, unwashed masses'. In other words, to return to Ricoeur's ideas, social media, when viewed through this particular lens, perform double duty: they are perceived as key 'utopian' instruments of social struggle for the repressed classes in distant lands; at the same time, such a perception is strongly ideological insofar as it serves to (re-)legitimate the relative power and privilege of the position of those who supply, observe, and comment from afar on the use of these technological instruments.

The notion of a 'Twitter Revolution' has also been greeted with considerable scepticism. For Mishra, 'the idea of a Twitter revolution is very suspect' (quoted in Schectman, 2009). Restricted access to these technologies by activists and the general populace in the countries involved is a key reason for this suspicion. In a widely cited statistic, technology commentator Evgeny Morozov (2011b) reports that there were only 19,235 registered Twitter accounts in Iran at the time of the 2009 uprising (equalling only 0.027 percent of the population). Similarly, Rich (2011) observes that, 'only some 20 percent of those masses [involved in the Egyptian protests] have Internet access'. In light of such statistics, 'inflated claims' about social networking lead, in Cottle's (2011: 651) assessment, to charges of 'media centrism and technological determinism' that detract from the full complexities that are at play in these conflicts.

Nevertheless, while it is now widely acknowledged that social and other forms of new media 'have not caused' the social unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, there is strong support for the view that 'they have most certainly aided it' (El Hamamsy, 2011: 456; Zuckerman, 2011; Idle and Nunns, 2011). As one commentator puts it, at very least, 'social media helped make the grievances all the more urgent and difficult to ignore' (Ghannam, quoted in El Hamamsy, 2011: 456). In discussing the relationship between the two, the key is

to 'not confuse tools with motivations' (Ghannam, quoted in El Hamamsy, 2011: 455), and to not decontextualise use of these tools. In relation to this last point, the Scandinavian media scholar Christian Christensen (2011: 247) remarks that what was most striking about the Swedish government's enthusiastic embrace of social media technologies as tools for change as a direct result of events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya was 'the extent to which technology [and its use] was decontextualised'. Meanwhile, it was Slavok Žižek who was reported to have remarked of the Egyptian protests that 'it was immediately possible for all of us around the world to identify with it, to recognize what it was about, without any need for cultural analysis of the features of Egyptian society' (quoted in El-Affendi, 2011: 1269).

Following the arguments of a number of scholars writing from within media and communications and political science (broadly defined), here I want to argue (contra Žižek) that in order to better understand the events that collectively formed what has become known as the 'Arab Spring', and in order to gain a firmer grasp of the role of new media technologies within these events, and what both tell us about the relationship between ideology and utopia, it is important to (a) 'grappl[e] with the conditions of the countries themselves' (Anderson, 2011: 7), (b) understand how these specific events fit within larger international and historical contexts of political mobilisation and technology use, and (c) give consideration to the complicated strategies and tactics that are mobilised around media access during times of social unrest. Each of these will be addressed in turn in relation to the specific national context of Egypt.

## Media Technologies and Revolution: The Egyptian Context

In an important essay that addresses the issue of country-by-country difference, Anderson (2011: 2) writes that, while poverty and unemployment were recurrent themes across the region, the conflicts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya each 'reflected divergent economic grievances and social dynamics' and that 'the patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely'. In the case of Egypt, unrest was said to have been fuelled by 'the government's deteriorating ability to provide basic services and seeming indifference to widespread unemployment and poverty' (Anderson, 2011: 4), and was complicated by the involvement of an army that is respected but hostile to economic liberalisation and reform. The Egyptian case was also unusual insofar as, prior to the protests, it was a country that, by regional standards at least, enjoyed an 'unusually high tolerance for free expression' (5). Very different circumstances characterised events in Tunisia and Libya (Anderson, 2011), and elsewhere in the region (Al-Rasheed, 2012; Varisco, 2011; 'Chronology', 2011).

While there is the need to balance the role played by social media technologies as instigators of change against other contextual factors, there is also the issue of how the 'Twitter Revolution' rhetoric operates from a 'somewhat a-historical focus in digital technology' (Anderson, 2011). That is to say, discussion of the use of social media in Egypt ignores the longer history of technology use in political protest in that country (including the role of the telegraph in disseminating Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech which helped 'spark' the Egyptian upheavals of 1919 – Anderson, 2011: 2),[5] as well as earlier forms of political protest and pre-digital social networking. For example, El Hamamsy (2011: 456) notes how, prior to the events of 2011, there had been an 'unprecedented number of demonstrations, and especially sit-ins and strikes, by unemployed youth, political dissidents and trade-union activists' that date back to at least 2003. Looking further back, the Egyptian Nobel Laureate and writer Naguib Mahfouz (1990), in his novel *Palace Walk* (the first of his 'Cairo Trilogy'), gives a detailed account of the role played by school and café networks in mobilising resistance to the British in the lead up to the 1919 Revolution (see also, Al-Hakim, 1990).

Beyond bland pronouncements hailing a 'Twitter Revolution', closer scrutiny of new media in Egypt (and elsewhere) reveals a particularly rich and complicated picture. In Egypt, as I will sketch below, government policy, activist networks, tech companies, and telecommunications companies all played key roles in shaping how social media use unfolded during the uprisings.

In a wide-ranging study of the changing Egyptian media landscape, Khamis (2011: 1161; 2008) notes how it was the government of President Hosni Mubarak in fact which initiated key media reforms, including the introduction of satellite television channels, and increased Internet access from 1993. Both these measures contributed in part to his undoing. In the former case, it was Al Jazeera's coverage of events that contributed in key ways to the government's credibility crisis (Khamis, 2011: 1165). In the latter case, Internet access provided activists with a space for communication and debate – including with other activists in the region (Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 2011) – and became, in Khamis' words, a 'stronghold of minority ideologies in the Middle East, including liberal currents' (Hatina, 2011: 8). In short, it 'ratified the right to dissent and questioned the Arab status quo' (9).

Regarding the Egyptian government's response to social media, Khamis (2011: 1162) argues that activist use of these media was tolerated initially because of the view that Internet communication might serve as a pressure valve of sorts, providing dissenters with a forum in which to vent frustrations without resorting to public protest. That they then moved to shut down Internet access has been viewed as an acknowledgment that it posed a threat (El Hamamsy, 2011: 455).[6] For El Hamamsy and Khamis, this proved a decisive moment (or, in

Mannheim's terms, the point at which it was recognised that reality might be transcended): deprived of key means of communication, Egyptians took to the streets to protest. The subsequent resumption of blocked Internet and telephony services revealed the scale of regime violence that had been masked by the lack of coverage. For Vila (2012), what this reveals is that possessing an 'Internet kill switch' does not 'prevent information from getting uploaded' (via YouTube and channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya), it 'can only delay it'.

Also of interest here are El Hamamsy's observations on the attempted interventions of technology companies and the involvement of telecommunications companies in the unrest. For instance, with respect to tech companies, at the height of the Internet block, Google announced a well-intentioned but ineffective service, called speak2tweet, which would convert voice messages to tweets for those with international land-line access, of which there were few (El Hamamsy, 2011: 460). And, with respect to telcos, much controversy was generated by the seemingly partisan involvement of telecommunications companies in supporting the Egyptian government during the uprisings. For example, Vodafone sent a series of pro-Mubarak text messages between 28 January and 2 February, 2011; a further rather more ambiguous message was sent on the night of 2 February calling on their subscribers to not 'listen to rumours' and to 'keep Egypt's safety in sight' (quoted in El Hamamsy, 2011: 462). The following day, Vodafone issued a statement declaring it was 'forced' to send the messages, a move which, in El Hamamsy's view, due its late timing and other factors, 'did not quite absolve Vodafone and other telecommunications companies in the eyes of the people' (462).

From this examination of the role of media technologies in the Egyptian uprising, three key themes or issues emerge. First, the 'Twitter Revolution' moniker elides the political and media complexities involved in the Egyptian uprising (and broader Arab Spring conflicts). Writing for *Foreign Affairs*, Zuckerman suggests that 'any attempt to credit a massive political shift to a single factor – technological, economic, or otherwise – is simply untrue' (for similar sentiments, see Ingram, 2011). Rather, events in Egypt, as elsewhere, are more likely the result of a 'bubbling cauldron' (Zuckerman, 2011) of ingredients, a highly complicated 'interplay between the online and the offline' (Christensen, 2011: 652), a 'moving complex of interpenetrating communication flows and their political efficacy across the different uprisings' (Cottle, 2011: 652).

Second, the Egyptian case (as with the Arab Spring as a whole) should be understood as a political and communications struggle between government and activists (Khamis, 2011: 1165 – my emphasis). Critics such as Malcolm Gladwell (2011) and Evgeny Morozov (2011a, 2011b) are very sceptical about the lasting impact of networked social media both during

and after large-scale political protest. Others take a quite different view. Shirky (2011), for example, argues that, 'as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action'. 'These increased freedoms,' he argues, 'can help loosely coordinated publics demand change'. This, for Ingram (2011), can be 'a very powerful thing'. Both sides, I would suggest, risk capture within Mannheim's paradox insofar as debate of technology, ideology and utopia gets 'caught up in' ideology (Ricoeur, 1986: 159-160).[7] El Hamamsy (2011: 463) negotiates around some of these issues by arguing that we must regard these technologies as simultaneously tools of control and manipulation and as offering 'mode[s] of resistance'. That is to say, in the Egyptian dispute (and elsewhere in the region) media technologies were mobilised simultaneously in support for the will for stasis (ideology) and the will for change (the utopian urge).[8]

Third, it is by no means certain that Egypt (or any of the other key countries associated with the Arab Spring) has in fact had a 'successful revolution' (Khamis, 2011: 1169 – my emphasis); at very least, 'success' is a highly contingent concept. As one commentator, writing for *The Washington Quarterly* in late 2011, declares, 'Egypt's revolution is decidedly not over' (Masoud, 2011: 117). According to Masoud, 'the pluralism (and attendant lack of leadership) of Egypt's revolt has been hailed as its great strength', but also constitutes its greatest obstacle (117-118). Dividing those who earlier combined to oust Mubarak, he argues, is a growing schism that is formed around a 'fundamental disagreement over what democracy is, what it should produce, and what its limits should be' (118). Just as there are significant differences between each national conflict, so each country faces 'vastly different challenges moving forward' (Anderson, 2011: 3; see also, Wright, 2011; Olivier, 2012; Roy, 2012), with the prospects of some looking brighter than for others.[9]

## Ideology, Utopia, and the Arab Spring

Having provided this extended discussion of the Arab Spring, I wish to now consider how these events and the use of technologies associated with them might be understood from the perspective of the earlier examination of ideology and utopia.

From the commentary on and reportage of unrest in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there appears, from an initial reading at least, to be a close, almost direct, correlation between them and Mannheim's theories on ideology and utopia. These events are striking in the present context as they would appear to follow Mannheim's specific formulation, described earlier, of 'reality-

transcending' ideas or 'wish-images' for social and political and economic change that were taken up by certain (oppressed or subordinate) societal groups and then 'embodied [...] into their actual conduct' and subsequently concretising (at least in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases according to some commentators) to become, in Mannheim's (1966: 174) terms, 'utopian'.

This same theoretical pairing of ideology and utopia is also discernible in political commentary on events in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. It has been suggested that one reason Western political commentators have been so fascinated by the Arab Spring uprisings as a whole is that these events responded to the hitherto unanswered 'vexed question of the shape of possible democratic alternatives to durable Arab authoritarianism' (El-Affendi, 2011: 1255; see also, Agathangelou and Soguk, 2011: 551).

Significantly, though, these similarities also extend to the same issues identified as problematic in Mannheim's theorisation of ideology and utopia. Take, for instance, the difficulty which Levitas (1990) notes of identifying whether an 'idea' is utopian and whether it has affected change. Even with the benefit of hindsight, Levitas argues, this is difficult to do, and is a task made even more difficult in light of the manifold forces fuelling the uprisings discussed above. The intermingling of ideological and utopian elements makes the kind of determinations that Mannheim appears to be calling for extremely difficult – as can be illustrated in the description of new media use by activists in the Middle East as enabling both the will for change, a space for the promulgation of 'liberal ideological thinking' (Hatina, 2011: 8), and government control and surveillance. It is in this context that Bloch's alternative conception of ideology and utopia as 'growing out of the same soil' and 'interpenetrating in the conceptions of the age' (Geoghegan, 2004: 130) is instructive because it acknowledges the messiness of the ideology-utopia pairing – an intermingling that was especially evident in the above analysis of the Arab Spring.

Ricoeur's re-theorisation of the ideology-utopia pairing presents some productive possibilities when applied to the events of the Arab Spring. For instance, his emphasis on ideology's initial 'integrative function' (prior to any later 'distortion') is helpful in explaining (to return to the earlier example discussed in the previous paragraph) how Middle Eastern activists can be described as unified by 'liberal' or 'minority ideologies' (Hatina, 2011: 8). Also instructive here is his formulation of utopia as the 'glance from nowhere' that seeks to convince others that 'imagination and not violence must make the break with the past' (Ricoeur, 1986: 287), and of utopia as that which 'replace[s] power with something else' (288).

What continues to dog the theories of Mannheim and Ricoeur (specifically his idea of a 'criterion of appropriateness'), however, and also forms something of recurrent theme running throughout the commentary on the Arab Spring, is the vexed issue of 'realisability'. The extent to which the social uprisings discussed above were so heavily shaped by manifold competing forces, and the complicated and at times contradictory engagements with media technologies during these conflicts, suggests the need for a revised understanding of utopia that responds to (if not fully resolves) this issue.

### Utopia Within Ideology –Three Aspects of the Enduring Importance of Utopia and Ideology in Examinations of New Media

The above examination of events in Egypt and elsewhere in the region reveals two things. On the one hand, events in Egypt (as well as in Tunisia and Libya) bore a seemingly close resemblance to Mannheim's precise formulation of the relationship between utopia and ideology. On the other hand, the complexities of these distinct national conflicts, and the complicated involvement of media in them, reemphasises many of the existing critiques of Mannheim's theories, and further illustrates just how problematic the issue of utopian 'realisability' is. This particular issue, in effect, forms the Achilles' heel of numerous attempts to theorise utopia, including those profiled here.

Despite this vexed issue of realisability, a key contention of this article is that these twin ideas still hold significant potency, and productive theoretical possibilities can continue to be found by engaging with them in critical examinations of new media technologies and their respective cultures of use. For a number of critics (Ricoeur, 1986; Mullins, 1979), the historical tendency to oppose utopia to ideology (as distortion) remains problematic. A more productive orientation, as I see it, one that we can see beginning to be worked out by Ricoeur and developed more fully by the likes of Levitas (1990), is to think of utopia not as oppositional to but as always existing *within* ideology. Thus, rather than conceive of utopia as necessarily about the realisation of change, Levitas perceives the more effective role of utopia to be, first and foremost, as a form of social criticism or social critique (Levitas 1990: 196). Framed in this way, the concept of utopia is at its most powerful, productive, and provocative (in the sense of provoking the possibilities of or opportunities for change), and can be more usefully applied to the events of the Arab Spring. This is especially the case when this critique is motivated by three interconnected elements, which are sketched below.

The first involves a concern for the power that is invested in and yielded by institutions and institutional structures (whether these be corporations, media public policy, or otherwise).

This concern lies at the heart of the view that 'deinstitutionalization is the kernel of all utopias' (Ricoeur 1986: 299). To conceive of utopia in this way – as a critique of institutional structure and power – dovetails with similar concerns pursued within cultural theory (Gibson, 2007), especially the influential and pioneering work of Michel Foucault (2011, 2009, 2008), and the long and established tradition of political economic (Albarran, 2010; Freedman, 2008; Wasko, 2004; Mansell, 2004; Mosco, 1996; Golding and Murdock, 1991) and cultural economic (Bennett, et al., 2008; Du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Goggin, 2011) approaches to the study of media and communications. Here it is valuable to recall Ricoeur's (1986: 288) argument that ideologies *and* utopias both deal with power: the former is an attempt to sustain or legitimate it, while the latter is an attempt to replace it with something else. As we have seen in the Egyptian case, use of, and attempts to exert control over, media and communications technologies are central to these struggles.

The second application of utopia as social critique involves a concern for anamnesis. This might be described as an engagement with 'the idea that we have forgotten something, and consequently our problem is not so much to invent as to rediscover what we have forgotten' (Ricoeur 1986: 307). In other words, in this instance, cultural critique is motivated by a desire to excavate, recollect, and rediscover a 'hidden' or forgotten past in order to grasp 'the emergence of meaning and of the future in the present' (Touraine, 2000: 29). As a critical approach, it has already proven particularly productive in studies of media technologies, both old and new (Milne, 2010; Gitelman, 2008; Chun and Keenan, 2006; Gitelman and Pingree, 2003; Tofts, Jonson and Cavallaro, 2002; Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Tofts and McKeich, 1998; Marvin, 1988). The critical effectiveness of recollection and rediscovery as an orientation lies in its ability to temper the enthusiasm that feeds techno-boosterism and to recast the past in order to grasp the present. In the present context, looking back to both pre-digital forms of social networking and, especially, the longer history of technology use in social unrest in Egypt – from the role of the telegraph in sparking the 1919 upheavals (Anderson, 2011: 2), to the importance of typewriters and carbon copiers for those opposed to Anwar El Sadat's regime (Fandy, 2000) – is valuable in assessing the impacts of new media technologies, such as Twitter and Facebook, in facilitating or influencing the Egyptian (and wider 'Arab Spring') uprisings. Anamnesis can also be helpful in serving as a reminder of how, for example, media and communications technologies have historically served as key political tools of 'modernization' in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 2005), albeit in 'highly ambivalent' ways, such that 'the margin of freedom allowed for the media [in Egypt] has been constantly widening and shrinking, as it oscillates between the poles of freedom and government repression' (Khamis, 2008: 264). Not only is such historical recollection valuable in emphasising that social unrest (the utopian urge) is always the result of a confluence of factors, [10] it also suggests that utopia (as social critique) can be 'reborn at the very core of a critique of technology' (Schaer, 2000: 6), rather than the other way round (as appears to have been the case in some of the more extreme techno-boosterist accounts of a 'Twitter revolution').

The third involves recognition of the potency that is made possible through commitment to the transformative potential of invention and inventiveness. This is discernible in a range of philosophical deliberations on culture and technology. For instance, for Jean-François Lyotard, 'Computers could [...] provide the information necessary for individuals and groups to decide on the best tactics for "imaginative invention"' (Murphie and Potts, 2003: 209). As Murphie and Potts remark, in holding to this belief,

*Lyotard looks to a creative future rather than a mourning of the past. He calls to us to use technology not to become more utilitarian or profitable, but rather to become more sophisticated, imaginative and inventive in the way we live (Murphie and Potts, 2003: 209).*

A commitment to inventiveness is also evident in Jean-Luc Nancy's writing. In his *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, for example, Nancy (2007) builds on a very careful critique which differentiates between 'globalization' and 'mondialization' (and which privileges the latter), to argue for the undecidability of beginnings. As Nancy's translators explain, 'the resource of the undecidability and groundlessness of beginnings is that another beginning, that is to say, other beginnings, would be possible' (Raffoul and Pettigrew, 2007: 13). In the present context, such considerations, once again, must be understood from the perspective that utopia always exists *within* ideology (Levitas) and that both are concerned with power (Ricoeur). How both are interpreted depends on one's position and perspective. Thus, earlier technologies, such as television (as noted earlier), promised for the Egyptian government an ideologically inflected 'another beginning' – one framed around modernization discourses. Meanwhile, fascination with the revolutionary promise of more recent technologies is, especially for critics such as Shirky, connected to a rather more utopian sense of 'another beginning' – one involving collective action and the potential for social change. This is precisely why the stakes are so high, for, in the political arena, the tensions between ideology and utopia more often than not involve a political and communications struggle between government and activists, which in turn has at its heart a struggle over the 'undecidability of beginnings'.

As the above three 'motivations' or 'orientations' seek to demonstrate, utopia is at its most convincing not when rendered as an alternative yet imaginary realm or reality, nor when viewed as something that must be 'realised' in order to be understood as properly utopian (Mannheim), but, rather, when rendered in the more straightforward yet potentially potent sense of social critique (or what Levitas calls the desire for a better way of being). It is in the latter sense that utopia is advocated here: as a potentially powerful tool or mechanism for critiquing societal structures and the technologies and technological discourses that shape them.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the complicated historical relationship that exists between ideology and utopia in European thought (Mannheim and Ricoeur), and what this relationship can teach us about the role of media technologies in the significant upheavals experienced in Egypt (and elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East) during the 'Arab Spring'. This analysis has revealed strong parallels between Mannheim's formulation of the ideology/utopia relationship and events in Egypt. It has also highlighted the merit of Ricoeur's conception of utopia as a 'glance from nowhere', as a productive 'imagining of something else' (1986: 266). A key issue, however, with the theories of Mannheim and Ricoeur, is the issue of realisability: that is, how, and indeed whether it is possible, to determine satisfactorily whether the 'utopian urge' has been fulfilled. Examining events in Egypt, and the ambiguous role of media technologies within them, only serves to highlight the difficulties in making any clear determinations about utopian realisability.

Nonetheless, and despite the vexed issue of realisability, in the second part of this article I argued that ideology and utopia continue to hold considerable contemporary significance, and can be productively recast – following Levitas – when utopia is understood as existing *within and emerging from* ideology, rather than when set in strict opposition to each other (as per Mannheim). This alternative understanding (where the one emerges from the other), and the key role played by media technologies, was extended around three interconnected themes or foci: the crucial role of power in both ideology *and* utopia; the importance of historical memory and recollection to analyses of both; and how utopia (and ideological resistance to it) pivots on the undecidability of beginnings.

Finally, it is understood that this revised approach to the ideology/utopia relationship by no means fully escapes from or resolves Mannheim's paradox. Nevertheless, the emphasis it gives to contextual and historical specificity does respond to, and works to resist, the universalising tendencies that were at the heart of Geertz's critique of the paradox that he saw structuring Mannheim's conceptualisation of ideology and his larger sociological project.

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## Notes

[1] Indeed, it is this particular characterisation that has attracted the most strident criticism, such as the common complaint that utopias thus conceived are safe and non-threatening, a space where 'everything is compatible with everything else', where 'there is no conflict between goals', and where there is a 'dissolution of obstacles' (Ricoeur 1986: 296) – in a word, utopia as 'perfectionism' (Donskis 1997: 148, & cf. 150 & 152). Utopia understood in this way is considered '*u-chronic*, meaning it eliminates human activity and innovation as well as conflict' (Touraine 2000: 20). This is the vision of utopia that the writer Georges Perec condemns as 'depressing' because, collectively, such spaces 'leave no room for chance, for difference, for the miscellaneous' (Perec, 1999: 191).

[2] It is the former of these two understandings of ideology that is sometimes conflated with utopia, so that utopia is conceived of as a form of concealed 'social engineering' (for a full discussion of this line of argument, see Donskis 1997: 128ff). An even more extreme extension of this view is the further conflation of utopia with totalitarianism. On this topic, see Donskis (1997: 130ff) and, for a historical overview, Rouvillois (2000).

[3] One difficulty in contrasting ideology and its relationship to utopia is specifically Marxist, insofar as, in Marxist thought, as Ricoeur (1986: 271) argues, 'the distinction between utopia and ideology tends to disappear'. It can, in fact, be understood as a double 'disappearance': first, Marxist thought 'opposes ideology to praxis, and what is opposed to praxis is fancy or the imagination' (271); a second criterion of ideology (especially in the work of Engels and Althusser), he notes, is to oppose it to science, with the result that the 'unscientific covers both ideology and utopia' (271).

[4] It is an apparent impasse that it is possible to negotiate, however. For instance, Ruth Levitas (1990) posits a simple distinction between hope (for that which can be realised) and desire (for a better way of being), with utopia constituting the second of the two positions (190-192). In Levitas's view, it is politics that transforms the second into the first: a desire for a better way of being (the utopian urge) transmuted into a realisable future. What is useful about this configuration is that utopia can be an unrealisable desire and still have an impact.

[5] As one commentator puts it, 'the media of the day has always been transcendent in revolutions' (Hirschberg quoted in Moore, et al., 2011: 4).

[6] Interestingly, Ghannam (2011: 16) reports that in Tunisia, 'authorities blocked Twitter in its four weeks of protest [...], yet proxies are regularly used in Tunisia, and Ben Ali did not shut down the Internet'.

[7] The Gladwell-Morozov / Shirkey debates over the role of social media in these uprisings also get caught up in issues concerning the enduring difficulty of correlating cause and effect. If media effects research has taught us one thing, it is that this is notoriously difficult to determine.

[8] In a widely circulated blog post, Ulises Meijas (2011) suggests a key problem with the 'Twitter revolution' label is that 'depoliticizes our understanding of the conflicts' and that it 'whitewashes the role of capitalism in suppressing democracy'. Meijas develops this latter point in two directions. The first, which carries echoes of the sorts of arguments that used to be made in the early days of the Internet by the likes of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, is via the argument that 'the emerging market structure of the internet is threatening [the Internet's] potential to be used by people as a tool for democracy' (Meijas, 2011). The second takes the line that, 'as digital networks grow and become more centralized and privatized, they increase opportunities for participation, but they also increase inequality, and make it easier for authorities to control them' (2011). For Meijas, then, the ultimate struggle will not be one over who utilises networked social media. Rather, it will be one pitted 'against those who own and control the network'.

[9] Similarly, in the case of Tunisia, one online comment, posted soon after the ousting of the then Tunisian President, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, observes: 'I don't think we can speak of the "Tunisian Revolution" as a revolution that "brought down the government" because much of the old govt and the military are still in power and the "revolution" is not even over yet' (AnonAnon, 2011).

[10] As Hofheinz (2005: 96) writes, 'The Internet is one factor that in tandem with others (satellite TV, youth culture, and the "globalization" of consumer products, social networks, and ideational configurations) is creating a dynamic of change that is helping to erode the legitimacy of traditional authority structures in family, society, culture/religion, and also the state, and thus creating pressure for reform.'

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