

A hunger strike – the ecology of a protest: the case of Bahraini activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja


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Introduction

Since December 2010 the dramatic spectacle of the spread of mass uprisings, civil unrest and protest across North Africa and the Middle East have been chronicled daily on mainstream media and new media. Broadly speaking the Arab Spring - as it came to be known - is challenging repressive, corrupt governments and calling for democracy and human rights. The convulsive events linked with these debates have been striking not only because of the rapid spread of historically momentous mass protests but also because of the ways in which the media “have become inextricably infused *inside* them” enabling the global media ecology to perform “an integral part in building and mobilizing support, co-ordinating and defining the protests within different Arab societies as well as trans-nationalizing them” (Cottle 295). Images of mass protests have been juxtaposed against those of individuals prepared to self-destruct for political ends. Video clips and photographs of the individual suffering of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation and the Bahraini Abdulhadi al-Khawaja’s emaciated body foreground, in very graphic ways, political struggles that larger events would mask or render invisible.

Highlighting broad commonalities does not assume uniformity in patterns of protest and media coverage across the region. There has been considerable variation in the global media coverage and nature of the protests in North Africa and the Middle East (Cottle). In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen uprisings overthrew regimes and leaders. In Syria it has led the country to the brink of civil war. In Bahrain, the regime and its militia violently suppressed peaceful protests. As a wave of protests spread across the Middle East and one government after another toppled in front of 24/7 global media coverage, Bahrain became the “Arab revolution that was abandoned by the Arabs, forsaken by the West ... forgotten by the world” and largely ignored by the global media (Al-Jazeera English). Per capita the protests have been among the largest of the Arab Spring (Human Rights First) and the crackdown as brutal as elsewhere. International organizations have condemned the use of military courts to trial protestors, the detaining of medical staff who had treated the injured and the use of torture, including the torture of children (Fisher). Bahraini and international human rights organizations have been systematically chronicling these violations of human rights, and posting on websites distressing images of tortured bodies often with warnings about the graphic depictions viewers are about to see. It was in this context of brutal suppression, global media silence, and the reluctance of the international community to intervene, that the Bahraini-Danish human rights activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja launched his “death or freedom” hunger strike.

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Even this radical action initially failed to interest international editors who were more focused on Egypt, Libya and Syria, but media attention rose in response to the Bahrain Formula 1 Race in April 2012. Pro-democracy activists pledged “days of rage” to coincide with the race and highlight continuing human rights abuses in the kingdom (Turner). As Khawaja’s health deteriorated the Bahraini government resisted calls for his release (Article 19) from the Danish government who requested that Khawaja be extradited there on “humanitarian grounds” for hospital treatment (Fisk).

This article does not explore the geo-politics of the Bahraini struggle or the possible reasons why the international community – in contrast to Syria and Egypt – has been largely silent, and reluctant to debate the issues. Important as they are, those remain questions for Middle Eastern specialists to address. In this article I am concerned with the overlapping and interpenetration of two ecologies.

The first ecology is the ethical framing of a prison hunger strike as a corporeal-environmental act of (self) destruction intended to achieve political ends. The second ecology is the operation of global media where international inaction inadvertently foregrounds the political struggles that larger events and discourses surrounding Egypt, Libya and Syria overshadow. What connects these two ecologies is the body of the hunger striker, turned into a spectacle and mediated via a politics of affect that invites a global public to empathize and so enter into his suffering. The connection between the two lies in the emaciated body of the hunger striker.

An Ecological Humanities Approach

This exploration of two ecologies draws on the ecological humanities and its central premise of connectivity. The ecological humanities critique the traditional binaries in western thinking between nature and culture; the political and social; them and us; the collective and the individual; mind, body and emotion (Rose & Robin, Rieber). Media ecology approaches similarly questions divorcing of mainstream media and new media and critical discourse likewise with words and actions (Fairclough). . Such binaries create artificial hierarchies, divisions and conflicts that ultimately impede the ability to respond to crises. Crises are major changes that are “out of control”, driven - primarily but not exclusively - by social, political and cultural forces that unleash “runaway systems with their own dynamics” (Rose & Robin 1). The ecological humanities response to crises is premised on the recognition of the all-inclusive connectivity of organisms, systems and environments and an ethical commitment to action from within this entanglement.

A founding premise of connectivity, first articulated by anthropologist and philosopher Gregory Bateson, is that the “unit of survival is not the individual or the species, but the organism-and-its-environment” (Rose & Robin 2). This highlights a dialectic in which an organism is shaped by and shapes the context in which it finds itself. Or as Harries-Jones puts it, relations are recursive as “events continually enter into, become entangled with, and then re-enter the universe they describe” (3). This ensures constantly evolving ecosystems but it also means any organism that “deteriorates its environment commits suicide” (Rose & Robin 2) with implications for the others in

the eco-system. Bateson's central premise is that organisms are simultaneously independent, as separate beings, but also interdependent. Interactions are not seen purely as exchanges but as dynamic, dialectical, dialogical and mutually constitutive. Thus, it is presumed that the destruction or protection of others has consequences for oneself. Another dimension of interactions is multi-modality, which implies that human communication cannot be reduced to a single mode such as words, actions or images but needs to be understood in the complexity of inter-relations between these (see Rieber 16). Nor can dissemination be reduced to a single technological platform whether this is print, television, Internet or other media (see Cottle). The final point is that interactions are "biologically grounded but not determined" in that the "cognitive, emotional and volitional processes" underpinning face-to-face or mediated communication are "essentially indivisible" and any attempt to separate them by privileging emotion at the expense of thought or vice versa is likely to be unhealthy (Rieber 17). This is most graphically demonstrated in a politically-motivated hunger strike when emotion and volition over-rides the survivalist instinct.

The Ecology of a Prison Hunger Strike

The radical nature of a hunger strike inevitably gives rise to medico-ethical debates. Hunger strikes entail the voluntary refusal of sustenance by an individual and when prolonged, such deprivation sets off a chain reaction as the less important components in the internal body systems shut down to protect the brain until even that can no longer be protected (see Basoglu et al). This extreme form of protest – essentially an act of self-destruction - raises ethical issues over whether or not doctors or the state should intervene to save a life for humanitarian or political reasons. In 1975 and 1991, the World Medical Association (WMA) sought to negotiate this by distinguishing between, on the one hand, the mentally/psychological impaired individual who chooses a "voluntary fast" and, on the other hand, the hunger striker who chooses a form of protest action to secure an explicit political goal fully aware of fatal consequences of prolonged action (see Annas, Reyes). This binary enables the WMA to label the action of the mentally impaired suicide but to claim that to do so for political protesters would be a "misconception" because the "striker ... does not want to die" but to "live better" by obtaining certain political goals for himself, his group or his country. "If necessary he is willing to sacrifice his life for his case, but the aim is certainly not suicide" (Reyes 11). In practice, the boundaries between suicide and political protest are likely to be much more blurred than this but the medico-ethical binary is important because it informs discourses about what form of intervention is ethically appropriate. In the case of the "suicidal" the WMA legitimizes force-feeding by a doctor as a life-saving act. In the case of the political protestor, it is de-legitimized in discourses of an infringement of freedom of expression and an act of torture because of the pain involved (see Annas, Reyes).

Philosopher Michel Foucault argued that prison is a key site where the embodied subject is explicitly governed and where the exercising of state power in the act of incarceration means the body of the imprisoned no longer solely belongs to the individual. It is also where the "body's range of significations" is curtailed, "shaped and invested by the very forces that detain and imprison it" (Pugliese 2). Thus, prison creates the circumstances in

which the incarcerated is denied the “usual forms of protest and judicial safeguards” available outside its confines. The consequence is that when presented with conditions that violate core beliefs he/she may view acts of self-destruction – such as hunger strikes or lip sewing - as one of the few “means of protesting against, or demanding attention” or achieving political ends still available to them (Reyes 11, Pugliese).

This binary labelling of a hunger strike implicates the state, which, in the act of imprisoning, has assumed a measure of power and responsibility for the body of the individual. If a protest action is labelled suicidal by medical professionals - for instance at Guantanamo – then the force-feeding of prisoners can be legitimized within the WMA guidelines (Annas). There is considerable political temptation to do so particularly when the hunger striker has become an icon of resistance to the state, the knowledge of his/her action has transcended prison confines and the alienating conditions that prompted the action are being widely debated in the media. This poses a two-fold danger for the state. On the one hand, there is the possibility that the slow emaciation and death while imprisoned, if covered by the media, may become a spectacle able to mobilize further resistance that can destabilize the polity. On the other hand, there is the fear that in the act of dying and the spectacle surrounding it the hunger striker would have secured the public attention to the very cause they are championing. Central to this is whether or not the act of (self) destruction is mediated. It is far from inevitable that the media will cover this or do so in ways that enable the hunger striker’s appeal to the emotions of others. However, when it does, the international scrutiny and condemnation that follows may undermine the credibility of the state - as happened with the death of the IRA member Bobby Sands in Northern Ireland (Russell).

The Media Ecology and the Bahrain Arab Spring

The IRA’s use of an “ancient tactic ... to make a blunt appeal to sympathy and emotion” in the form of the Sands hunger strike was seen as “spectacularly successful in gaining worldwide publicity” (Willis 1). The media ecology has evolved dramatically since then. Over the past 20 years communication flows between the local and the global, traditional media formations (broadcast and print), and new communication media (Internet and mobile phones) have escalated. The interactions of the traditional media have historically shaped and been shaped by more “top-down” “politics of representation” in which the primary relationship is between journalists and competing public relations professionals servicing rival politicians, business or NGOs desire for media attention and framing issues in a way that is favourable or sympathetic to their cause. However, rapidly evolving new media platforms offer bottom up, user-generated content and a politics of connectivity and mobilization of ordinary people (Cottle 31).

However, this distinction has increasingly been seen as offering too rigid a binary to capture the complexity of the interactions between traditional and new media as well as the events they capture. The evolution of both meant their content increasingly overlaps and interpenetrates (see Bennett). New media technologies “add new communicative ingredients into the media ecology mix” (Cottle 31) as well as new forms of political protests and new ways of mobilizing dispersed networks of activists (Juris). Despite their pervasiveness, new media

technologies are “unlikely to displace the necessity for coverage in mainstream media”; a feature noted by activist groups who have evolved their own “carnavalesque” tactics (Cottle 32) capable of creating the spectacle that meets television demands for action-driven visuals (Juris). New media provide these groups with the tools to publicize their actions pre- and post-event thereby increasing the possibility that mainstream media might cover their protests.

However there is no guarantee that traditional and new media content will overlap and interpenetrate as initial coverage of the Bahrain Arab Spring highlights. Peaceful protests began in February 2011 but were violently quelled often by Saudi, Qatari and UAE militia on behalf of the Bahraini government. Mass arrests were made including that of children and medical personnel who had treated those wounded during the suppression of the protests. What followed were a long series of detentions without trial, military court rulings on civilians, and frequent use of torture in prisons (Human Rights Watch 2012). By the end of 2011, the country had the highest number of political prisoners per capita of any country in the world (Amiri) but received little coverage in the US. The Libyan uprising was afforded the most broadcast time (700 minutes) followed by Egypt (500 minutes), Syria (143) and Bahrain (34) (Lobe). Year-end round-ups of the Arab Spring on ABC ignored Bahrain altogether or mentioned it once in a 21-page feature (Cavell). This was not due to a lack of information because a steady stream has flowed from mobile phones, Internet sites and twitter as NGOs – Bahraini and international - chronicled in images and first-hand accounts the abuses. However, little of this coverage was picked up by the US-dominated global media.

It was in this context that the Bahraini-Danish human rights activist Abdulhadi Khawaja launched his “freedom or death” hunger strike in protest at the violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations, the treatment of prisoners, and the conduct of the trials. Even this radical action failed to persuade international editors to cover the Bahrain Arab Spring or Khawaja’s deteriorating health despite being, “one of the most important stories to emerge over the Arab Spring” (Nallu). This began to change in April 2012 as a number of things converged. Formula 1 pressed ahead with the Bahrain Grand Prix and pro-democracy activists pledged “days of rage” over human rights abuses. As these were violently suppressed, editors on global news desks increasingly questioned the government and Formula 1 “spin” that all was well in the kingdom (see BBC; Turner). Claims by the drivers – many of who were sponsored by the Bahraini government - that this was a sports event, not a political one, were met with derision and journalists more familiar with interviewing superstars were diverted into covering protests because their political counterparts had been denied entry to the country (Fisk). This combination of media events and responses created the attention, interest and space in which Khawaja’s deteriorating condition could become a media spectacle.

The Mediated Spectacle of Khawaja’s Hunger Strike

Journalists who had previously struggled to interest editors in Bahrain and Khawaja's plight found that in the weeks leading up to the Grand Prix and since "his condition rapidly deteriorated" and there were "daily updates with stories from CNN to the Hindustan Times" (Nulla). Much of this mainstream news was derived from interviews and "tweets" from Khawaja's family after each visit or phone call. What emerged was an unprecedented composite, a diary of witnesses to a hunger strike interspersed with the family's struggles with the authorities to get access to him, their almost tangible fear that the Bahraini government would not relent and he would die.

As these fears intensified 48 human rights NGOs called for his release from prison (Article 19) and Danish government formally requested his extradition for hospital treatment on "humanitarian grounds". Both were rejected. As if to provide evidence of Khawaja's tenuous hold on life, his family released an image of his emaciated body onto Twitter. This graphic depiction of the corporeal-environmental act of (self) destruction was "re-tweeted" and posted on countless NGO and news websites (see Al-Jazeera). It was also juxtaposed against images of multi-million dollar cars circling a race-track, funded by similarly large advertising deals and watched by millions of people around the world on satellite channels. Spectator sport had become a grotesque parody of one man's struggle to speak of what was going on in Bahrain.

In an attempt to silence the criticism the Bahraini government imposed a de facto news blackout denying all access to Khawaja in hospital where he had been sent after collapsing. The family's "tweets" while he was held incommunicado speak of a raw pain: their desperation to find out if he was still alive, and their grief. They also provided a new source of information and the refrain "where is alkhawaja" reverberated on Twitter and in global news outlets (see for instance Der Spiegel, Al-Jazeera). In the days immediately after the race the Danish prime minister called for the release of Khawaja, saying he is in a "very critical condition" (Guardian) as did the UN's Ban-Ki Moon (UN News and Media). The silencing of Khawaja had become a discourse of callousness and as global media pressure built Bahraini ministers felt compelled to challenge this on non-Arabic media, claiming Khawaja was "eating" and "well". The Bahraini Prime Minister gave one of his first interviews to the western media in years in which he denied "AlKhawaja's health is 'as bad' as you say. According to the doctors attending to him on a daily basis, he takes liquids" (Der Spiegel Online). Then after six days of silence the family was allowed to visit. They "tweeted" that while incommunicado he had been restrained and force-fed against his will (Almousawi), a statement almost immediately denied by the military hospital (Lebanon Now). The discourses of silence and callousness were replaced with discourses of "torture" through force-feeding. A month later Khawaja's wife announced he was ending his hunger strike because he was being force-fed by two doctors at the prison, family and friends had urged him to eat again, and he felt the strike had achieved its goal of drawing the world's attention to Bahrain government's response to pro-democracy protests (Ahlul Bayt News Agency).

Conclusion:

This article has sought to explore two ecologies. The first is of medico-ethical discourses which construct a prison hunger strike as a corporeal-environmental act of (self) destruction to achieve particular political ends. The second is of shifting engagement within media ecology and the struggle to facilitate interpenetration of content and discourses between mainstream news formations and new media flows of information. I have argued that what connects the two is the body of the hunger striker turned into a spectacle, mediated via a politics of affect which invites empathy and anger to mobilize behind the cause of the hunger striker. The body of the hunger striker is thereby (re)produced as a feature of the twin ecologies of the media environment and the self-environment relationship.

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