New World, New Media: The De-centring of “America”

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Three years makes a lot of difference.

In summer 2008, the focus of my scholarly and everyday world — as it had been for most of the last 20 years — was the United States. I was writing a book on the foreign policy of the George W. Bush Administration, following up articles I had published on public diplomacy and the projection of US power, and launching a new website on US politics and “America” in the world. Even the title of that website, “Enduring America”, pointed to a US-centred if deliberately multi-valent position: ‘The issue isn’t whether you and I are ‘pro-American’ or ‘anti-American’. The issue is how we negotiate the meaning of ‘America’— and, indeed, how we may be beyond ‘America’ — in our everyday lives.’

As I write in June 2011, the follow-up work on public diplomacy and the limits on US power has been published. However, the project on the Bush Administration is now consigned to past intention. And while I am still keenly involved in assessing the foreign policy of the Obama era, “America” is not necessarily at the centre of my perspective. Indeed, this morning I am writing not for “Enduring America” but for “EA WorldView”.

Already today I have pursued latest news on protests in Syria, military operations in Libya, and the mass trial of medical staff in Bahrain. Colleagues have considered the work of “hacktivists” who have not only penetrated the website of the Central Intelligence Agency, but that of the International Monetary Fund as well as the contacts list of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. There is a feature on the opposition in Yemen to be edited, and an essay on human rights in Iran to be published.

There is a place for “America” in all of this — interest in politics, society, and rights does not stop at national borders — but it is not necessarily, indeed not likely to be, a central place. Washington often stands as an observer and a bystander in changes which have overtaken the narratives of the post-Cold War world and international relations after 11 September 2001.

What has happened? Did the world change? Did “America”?
A starting point: we are seeing the “de-centring” of “America” — in politics and in communications — in world affairs.

Of course, it has never been the case that the US was the political, economic, and cultural centre for those pursuing local aspirations and concerns. As Bevan Sewell notes in his response in this issue, “A natural tendency to view our topics in an American-centric way ... is not the same as America actually being at the centre of the world.”

The salient point, though, is that it has long been portrayed as such, from Henry Luce's promotion, to the “American Century” in 1941, to today. In its crudest form, this exceptionalism-cum-universalism has been put forth as both a reality and an ideal, as in Charles Krauthammer's 1990 essay: “The immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The centre of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies.”

Twelve years later, Krauthammer went even further, not only putting forth a US centre but declaring that others had no power to affect this: “The unipolar moment has become the unipolar era. It remains true, however, that its durability will be decided at home. It will depend largely on whether it is welcomed by Americans or seen as a burden to be shed — either because we are too good for the world (the isolationist critique) or because we are not worthy of it (the liberal internationalist critique).”

Krauthammer, with his sweeping declarations, can be elevated to straw-man status, but others have put more nuanced portrayals to establish the immutable American centre. The scholar John Ikenberry, for example, was rebuffed in his 2004 declaration of “logics of order in the American age” by the inconvenience of events like the Iraq War. So in 2010, he was bemoaning, “The end of the Cold War, unipolarity, eroded sovereignty, and transformed security threats provide a less favourable environment in which to safeguard and manage liberal order.”

This is a situation which must be rectified — indeed, can only be rectified — by re-confirming Washington's pre-eminence:

The United States dominates the world as no state has in the past. At the same time, the political relations and institutional frameworks built over the past half-century for the organization of world politics have eroded. The United States is both partly responsible for this situation and a casualty of it: it has the capacity to dominate the world, but not the
legitimacy to rule. It has power but not authority.\textsuperscript{6}

Less than two years later, this construction is rendered problematic, if not superfluous. The transformations in national systems and elites, given labels such as the “Arab Spring”, have not occurred because of a US-led mission to restore American authority. They do not fit the two-dimensional model of a new competition in which US power and “decline” is measured against a China or an India. They occur because of local initiatives within regional frameworks and interactions.

And that is true in another important respect. Three years ago, my first ports of call for reviewing the news would have included \textit{The New York Times} and \textit{The Washington Post}. Now the day begins with a far different approach. It is not just that a very non-US outlet like Al Jazeera English — on broadcast, print, and Web platforms — has overtaken American counterparts. It is that “new media” has overtaken the international pages of daily newspapers. Twitter is now a portal not only to the latest from publications in Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine, Libya, and Brazil; it is the opening to the latest from NGOs, activists, financial institutions, and other actors. Rather than waiting for hours for a US publication to confirm a report, an active participant in new media can navigate a route picking up events (and interpretations of events) almost as they happen.

Consider EA WorldView. Initially, the objective for the website was a space to analyse US politics and foreign policy on a day-to-day basis, but within two months of the site's launch, this mission shifted with the Gaza War of 2008/9. We were providing daily coverage of a conflict between Israel and Gaza, involving actors such as Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and Turkey, in which Washington was often marginal. And since mid-2009, we have specialised in news and analysis of tensions in Iran, tensions in which the US — despite the Tehran regime's proclamations of American-sponsored “regime change” — has often been an under-informed bystander.

The point is not just that a website could move from a US-centred perspective to information and enquiry starting from the standpoint of the “local”. It is that, in the 21st-century terrain of media and technology, that site can rival and even surpass long-established outlets in the presentation of international affairs. Access to news via the Internet rather than through print or television has been recognised by many observers; the further significance here is that an EA WorldView, with an all-volunteer staff and relaying on connections with sources, correspondents, and readers via social
media, can be the first port of call — complementing or moving beyond a Reuters, Al Jazeera, CNN, or BBC — in the provision of news and interpretation.

In short, the “gatekeepers” — both in politics and in the media — are no more. To cite one pertinent example, throughout 2009 the US Government pursued a nuclear-first approach towards Iran, both with respect to denouncing Tehran's nuclear programme and to pursuing negotiations. Washington's policymakers were aided by favoured outlets, notably David Sanger and William Broad of *The New York Times*, who would regularly proclaim that Iran was on the verge of producing a nuclear weapon.

Yet, in the aftermath of the disputed 2009 Iranian Presidential election, as the “traditional” media were blinded by Tehran's restrictions, others offered a different narrative. “New media” offered access to the developments inside the country, as the Green Movement tried to challenge not only the election but also the regime's position on political, legal, and social issues. Doing so, it supported the space for a rights-first approach, one that did not rest upon the centre of a US-Iran relationship but upon the local situation.

Other examples could be cited from well before December 2010, when an unemployed vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia set himself on fire, an episode that would foster protests against the regime of President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali. One might consider, for example, the interaction between “new media” and the non-US outlet of Al Jazeera in the Gaza War, which broke the limited, often isolated coverage of broadcasters like CNN and the BBC, as well as newspapers like *The New York Times*.

However, it was the Tunisian uprising, and what would follow, that brought out a re-configured political and media environment. What was noticeable throughout December and into early January was not that the US Government was trying to influence the situation — for better or worse, depending on your outlook — but that it was on the periphery, if present at all, during the events. President Obama's showcase speeches in 2009 from Ankara to Cairo had receded before the protests on the streets of Tunis and other towns and cities. The American media was almost oblivious to the developments — indeed, amongst outlets in Britain, only Brian Whitaker of *The Guardian* was noting the escalation of demonstrations, and that was on his personal blog, rather than his newspaper's website.

Local politics and media did not move into a void, however; they were always
Sites like *Nawaat* and bloggers like Slim Amamou (@slim404 on Twitter) operated in Arabic, French, and English to bring out and try to sort out the confusion of news and rumours. So when Ben Ali departed on 14 January, eventually to land in Saudi Arabia, the political transformation had been wrought from within, not from without.

Eleven days later, the process would begin to unfold in Egypt in the challenge to President Hosni Mubarak. There would be differences from Tunisia, of course, both in the local dynamic and in the US relationship to events. Washington, though late in reaction to the surge of protest and conflict, would twice try to encourage Mubarak to send out the proper message in nationally-televised speeches; twice it would be double-crossed by last-minute changes in wording and approach by the President. Perhaps more significantly, it would work behind the scenes in early February with the Egyptian military to ease Mubarak out without leaving a vacuum in power.

Yet, once again, the rise of the local was far removed from recent conceptions of the “unipolar” or of a US-brokered “order”. Egyptian activists used social media and on-the-ground networks to mobilise activism. While the start date for the protests was 25 January, the process had started long before, unnoticed by almost everyone outside Egypt. And it was catalytic events, such as the abduction of Wael Ghonim — Google executive and secret administrator of the influential “We Are Khaled Said” Facebook page, in memory of the young man killed by Egyptian police in summer 2010 — and his dramatic re-emergence on Egyptian TV, that would fuel the rising in the symbolic centre of Cairo’s Tahrir Square and beyond.

This is not to say, as events have moved to Yemen, Bahrain (uprising begun 14 February), Libya (uprising begun 17 February), and Syria (uprising begun 15 March), that there has been a complete upending of politics and geopolitics, with the US now distinguished by absence rather than presence. Yet we are in the midst of a re-negotiation of relationships — political, economic, social, and cultural — which in no way depends upon directions from “America”. The US, and the political and media institutions which have accompanied American power since 1945, have been decentralised.

One has to be careful not to over-represent this interaction of activism and media, whether to exalt or denounce it. Grassroots movements did not suddenly sprout with the discovery of e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; protest is not contingent on an Internet connection. Nor, of course, do States, governments,
militaries, and other institutions remain passive in the face of this activism.

There is no need, however, to adopt a simplistic approach to the process, indulging in tangential debates, often with competitors for media attention, and in irrelevant comparisons with pre-21st-century movements. Social media is not the endpoint of political activity; it is an instrument, one more powerful in scope and speed than predecessors in earlier “communications revolutions”. It does not replace face-to-face activity and dissemination through channels away from the Internet, but it can enhance and organise these. To meet Bevan Sewell's challenge in his response, it is not a question of “spread[ing] the message to the West rather than mobilis[ing] protest movements at home”. It is both.

The gatekeepers will not give way without a shout. The State-media dynamic in the US continues to function in its definition of events, even if that definition may be marginal, and “experts” like Evgeny Morozov (Belarussian, but now very much part of the US professional network) and Malcolm Gladwell will try to contain Internet-based activism and new media by claiming that they are either insignificant or destined for control and repression by the State.\(^7\)

However, we are in the obsolescence of American power — as a means and as an end — at least as it was defined only a few years ago by Joseph Nye as all his work on “soft power” and “smart power” was dedicated to the conclusion that the US was “Bound to Lead”. The world of 2011 has escaped those bounds, as Nye unwittingly illustrated in a talk in May 2011 in London on how “we are going to have to be much more subtle and sophisticated in the way we think about power”.

The American scholar and consultant to Government tried to take heed of “this burgeoning of information [that] created a new middle, which we saw in places like Tahrir Square. And also provided techniques like Twitter and Facebook, by which these groups could overcome the problems of collective action and coordinate with each other”.\(^8\) But he could only find comfort in the tried-and-true formulations, reassuring, “I don’t think the United States is in decline,” and then dedicating his talk on the bipolar of Washington and Beijing with references to “economic relations” and the “trans-national” of “terrorism”.

As I write these lines about Nye, I read a less astute but just as illuminating opinion by Fred Hiatt of The Washington Post. Worrying “What's Happening to America's Leadership Role?”, Hiatt ends with a platitude which — like Krauthammer in 2002 — is self-insulated from the “foreign”: “Whether the United States continues
to help keep the peace will depend less on India or Brazil’s emergence than on whether it can find leaders, as it always has before, with the conviction to make the case.’”

The US-centred sphere which I inhabited only a few years ago does not have the language to engage with the world of 2011 because it cannot conceive of that world apart from a primacy of American “power”. It cannot conceive of negotiation outside US influence or of transformation apart from US order.

And it is for that reason that my new sphere — the one in which, from a living room in central Britain, I can observe from Egypt to Libya to Bahrain to Iran to China to Sudan — will have to provide the language. “New media” offers a window on the changing landscape of negotiation, and it is also the location where much of that negotiation takes place.

During the challenge to the Iranian regime after the 2009 disputed Presidential election, candidate-turned-opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi punctuated his statements with the declaration, “We are the media.” Mousavi’s fate, as he, his wife, and fellow opposition leaders Mehdi and Fatemeh Karroubi endure a strict house arrest imposed since February 2011, is a reminder against Utopian visions of that call to media and activism; so is the struggle of the Iranian people to assert their claim to political, legal, social, and cultural rights in the face of a sustained, comprehensive repression.

Endnotes

6 Ibid.
7 See, for example, Evgeny Morozov, “Facebook and Twitter are just places revolutionaries go,” Guardian, 7 March 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-
