

Social Networks and Democratic Transition Vision and Reality

WALEED EL-ASHRY EBRAHIM ALI

PhD in Information and Communication Sciences
University Lyon 2 – FRANCE
Lecturer of Electronic Journalism
Faculty of Specific Education – Tanta University

Abstract

Over the past few years, social networks have gained significant popularity and become one of the new media platforms most widely used at an unprecedented form, not only as a powerful tool for community building and identity formation but also as a valuable means for political change and the collective action. These digital platforms have provided new avenues for political communication, along with contribute to creation of public sphere which could encourage democratic activity and dissemination of dissenting viewpoints, as well as engagement in social movements. Hence, it is not surprising that these platforms are emerging as an effective tool, not only to enhance democracy, but also to ignite social and economic advancement. In this respect, this paper shed light on the contribution of these new media platforms in building and sustaining democracy by studying certain mechanisms important, such as flows of information, freedom of expression, and independence of media, which can be used as a catalyst for advancing democratization in Egypt, along with discussion the challenges of democratic transition process.

Keywords: New media, Social networks, Arab spring, Democratic transition

Introduction

The massive wave of uprisings which have quickly spread across Arab countries in early 2011 highlights the distinct role of new media and their ability not only as a platform for ending repressive regimes but also as a starting point for supporting democratic. These digital platforms also have significantly impact on both developed and under-developed countries. In this sense, Riaz (2011) state that:

“The use of new media technologies has not only influenced the individuals and communities in the developed countries but also the people of developing countries and the countries in transition period have become part of the global community by using new media technologies, especially internet and mobile phones”(p.162).

Recent revolutions, which collectively referred to as “the Arab Spring” have demonstrated that the new media have potential to creating the collective consciousness of the general public, and provide unprecedented opportunities to improve political communication substantially under the citizens’ fear of speaking out – particularly in the Arab societies because of the intense state censorship (Lynch, 2011). Therefore, it will come as no surprise that these new platforms as an alternative platform “citizens’ media” to traditional media gained momentum and attention and hold an important place over

huge agitation campaigns against the authoritarian and oppressive regimes. Indeed, The term citizens’ media describes the ways in which citizens engage in media practice as a tool of empowerment, community cohesion, and expression of social and cultural identities. (Rodriguez , 2001)

In this sense, Ghannam, (2011) pointed out that:

“Social networking has changed expectations of freedom of expression and association to the degree that individual and collective capacities to communicate, mobilize and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead even greater voice, political influence and participation over the next 10 to 20 years”(p.13).

But in spite of numerous scholars and researchers have made theoretical contributions, and paid a great deal of attention to study the role of new media as an effective vehicle and a key organizing tool for the uprisings which swept across the Arab world (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), there are still several questions about the durability and the impact of these media which require significant rethinking about its role that still to be seen. In this respect, the first goal of this paper is to present an overview of the new media environment with a focus on its role as safe havens for democracy in the context of the January 25 revolution. The second objective is actually the focal point of this research paper, which strives to examine the role of new media in shaping democratic values. In other word, to what extent does these new platforms can be a catalyst for change and advancing democratization?

The Arab spring and January 25 revolution, 2011

The year 2011 saw huge changes in the Arab world by a number of revolutionary uprisings, which are collectively referred to as “the Arab Spring”. The Arab Spring is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests occurring in the Arab world in early 2011.

Since then, we are witnessing the birth

of political independence, where the way towards true and transparent democracy. There is a growing consensus that these uprisings witnessed in Arab world have common roots/ motivations including end to corruption, improved the economic and social situation, and the protection of human rights. Indeed, the January 25 revolution one of these uprisings that considered a historical turning point in the history of democracy in Egypt that led to topple the authoritarian regime of Egyptian President Mubarak, in addition to its success in fundamentally meaningful political change.

In fact, the January 25 revolution did not come out of the void (See Figure 1 for illustration). Many of activists had been protesting for years (e.g., the protest movements of Kefaya against the succession of Gamal Mubarak, the April 6 Youth move-

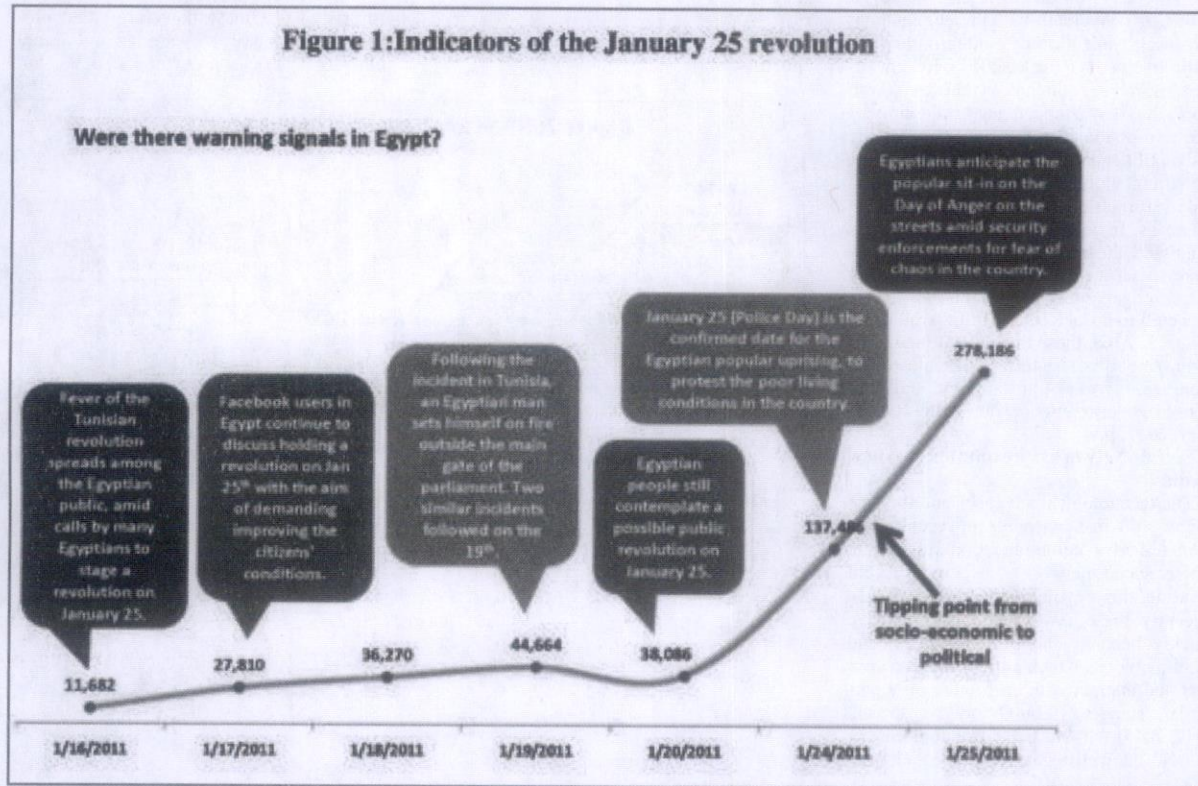
ment in support of labor protests, and the protest movements after fraudulent elections in late 2010), but they had largely failed to force meaningful change. Egyptians were influenced by Tunisian revolution and its success in elimination of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali on January 15, 2011, which strengthened a sense of collective identity (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). On 25 January 2011 "Day of Rage", tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo for the wave of popular protests "Day of Rage" against President Hosni Mubarak's autocratic regime that had governed the country for three decades. These protests were organized initially through the Facebook page "We are all Khaled Said".

Figure 1: Indicators of the January 25 revolution

New Media: safe havens for democracy

With increased use of the Internet, new media have gained significant popularity and have become one of the new platforms most widely used at an unprecedented form. These digital platforms have provided new avenues for political communication (Pew, 2011), along with contribute to creation of public sphere that could encourage democratic activity (Srinivasan & Fish, 2009) and dissemination of dissenting viewpoints, as well as engagement in social movements (Fahmi, 2009).

As such, the new media have provided unprecedented opportunities for individuals to produce the information and share it among themselves in an easy and timely manner, in addition to discussing political information with other citizens



(Krueger, 2002) about major events and topics of common interest under the repressive policies (Sohrabi-Haghighat, 2010) in different online communities (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) along with the ability to construct social and political relationships. In this context, Fahmi (2009) stated that:

“New media have created new geographies of protest and have shifted their campaigns and resources to alternative virtual venues, in addition to provide a means of navigation for street protestors” (p. 90).

Hence, it is not surprising that these platforms are emerging as an effective tool, not only to enhance democracy, but also to ignite social and economic advancement.

As mentioned above, the popular uptake of these platforms proves ‘democratizing’ by bring a new space for socializing as well as different forms of political conversation and engagement and the organization of contemporary social movements (Cottle, 2011). Recent report, however concludes that the Arab world has experienced an awakening of free expression that has now entered the body politic and has helped break down the stranglehold of state-sponsored media and information monopolies in those countries. In addition, the Arab world has witnessed the rise of an independent vibrant social media and steadily increasing citizen engagement on the Internet that is expected to attract 100 million Arab users by 2015. Also, these new social media inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable” (Ghanam, 2011, p. 4).

Social Networks: revolution of new media

The technological advances and the paradigm shift in new media in recent years have led to a communication revolution, where social network sites are a recent trend in this revolution (Moqbel, 2012). Recently, these new media platforms have quickly become one of the fundamental building blocks which allow people to connect and interact with each other on a particular subject (Ikhu-Omoregbe et al., 2012, p.45) without the substantial cost or without the media gatekeepers, in addition

to maintaining preexisting social connections (Ellison et al., 2007). In this respect, SNSs has been aptly described as a global phenomenon, the public display of connection (Donath & Boyd, 2004), and a phenomenon of communication and information (Vivar & Aguilar, 2010).

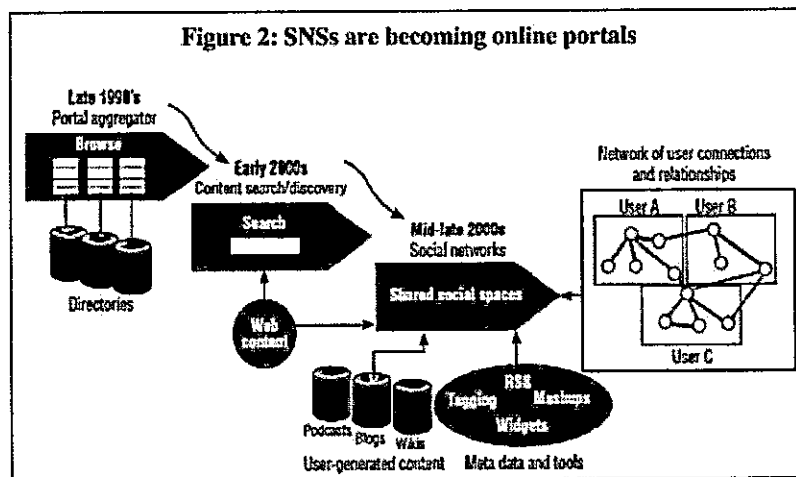
“Social networks are Internet sites where people publish and share all types of information with third parties, acquaintances and complete strangers” (Celaya, 2009, p. 92).

Coyle and Vaughn (2008) state that: “social networks exist because humans are societal and require relationships in order to survive” (p.13). Moreover, they represent an important tool for enriching a user’s digital lifestyle through providing a range of mechanisms to share and recommend news content (Singer et al., 2008), along with applications and collaborative tools (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: SNSs are becoming online portals

In sum, the contemporary communication landscape has seen the emergence of social network sites (SNSs) which have gained significant popularity and have become one of the new platforms most widely used under the social media at an unprecedented form. Further, these digital platforms have provided unprecedented opportunities for dialogue worldwide, combined with enhanced interaction between users and news around difficult and sensitive topics— particularly in the societies where media is not free (Ali & Hasoun, 2012).

More than ever, social network sites have become one of the hottest sites that rival the traditional media— in particular under increasing the offer and demand of its services by a new generation of users, to satisfy their thirst for news and to keep abreast of current events. Hence, it is not surprising that these new forms that provide “breaking news” are emerging not only as a basic source for the news, but



also as the most effective pillar for knowledge creation and transfer between users at an unprecedented form. Therefore, they are seen as 'a global consumer phenomenon' (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), that seen a power shift between consumers and traditional producers of information (Denegri-Knott, 2006) within the last few years.

Penetration of social networks in Egypt

Despite that revolutions occur regardless of the existence of the Internet or technology, implying that these digital platforms not causing the revolutions, yet it certainly has played a crucial role in the January 25 Revolution in Egypt by three main dynamics: organizing protests, shaping the narrative, and putting pressure on

Washington (Boyd, 2011).

In the section below, we analyze new media tools that has been used extensively and effectively during the Egyptian uprisings, which hailed as agents of change.

• Facebook

It has been observed that among Arab countries, Egypt has seen the highest increase in the number of Facebook users in the first quarter of 2011. According to the Arab Social Media Report, 2011, Facebook had been used primarily in Tunisia and Egypt to raise awareness of users about the ongoing civil uprisings (See Figure 3).

Newly released figures indicate that the number of Facebook users in the Arab world reached 43 million in April 2012. It is significant to note that Egypt holds the largest number of Facebook users in the re-

gion, with 5 million members, constituting one quarter of the total number of Arab users.

Figure 3: The Main Usage of Facebook during the Protests movements 2011

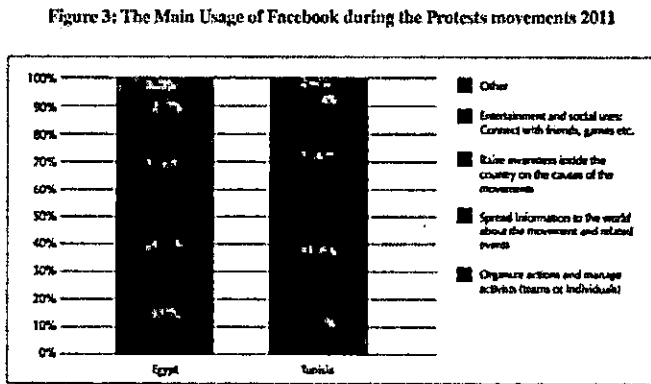
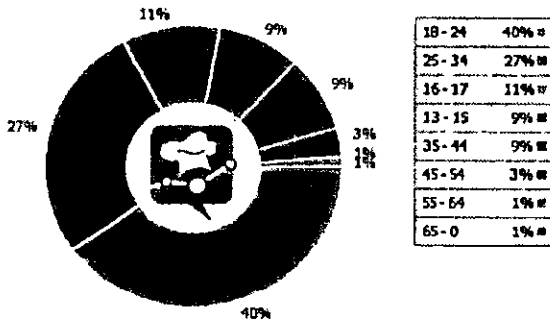


Figure 4: User age distribution on Facebook in Egypt



On the other hand, 86% of Facebook users in Egypt are Youth (See Figure 3). Despite that the Facebook is not the sole environment for political communication, but the greatest benefit that it has provided was a valuable means to rally and organize Egyptians during January 25 Revolution for real democracy.

Figure 4: User age distribution on Facebook in Egypt

• Twitter

Twitter is one of the most important avenues used during the Arab Revolutions. More specifically, Twitter was the most popular new media tools in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Newly released studies indicate that Egypt holds the largest number of Twitter users in the Arab region between January and 30 March, 2011 with 1.4 million (Chebib & Sohail, p.141). There are an estimated 131,204 Twitter users in Egypt between 1 January and 30 March 2011, generating an average of 24,000 tweets a day during that time period (Arab Social Media Report, 2011, p.28). In addition, an approximate 15,000 Egyptians were using Twitter to send messages concerning the nature and location of protests (O'Dell, 2011).

• YouTube

YouTube is a video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and watch videos. According to Alexa ranking, YouTube is the third most visited website on the Internet. YouTube was the social medium that captured the action of the 18-day Revolution. According to the report prepared by Techno Wireless, during the first week of the Egyptian Revolution 2011, Egyptian users viewed 8.7 million pages on YouTube. This number was reduced after the blockade of internet services by Egyptian authorities from 28 January until the first of February (Chebib & Sohail, p.141).

New media and democratic transition: The structural pathways

In fact, the discussion about the role of the new media including social networks as a catalyst for advancing democratization is not easy. However, we must recognize that "new media" become now a constituent of legitimacy in representing the broad masses, which give people greater power for speaking out and providing liberty.

Therefore, we suggest the following structural dimensions to achieve democratization by these new media platforms.

- Media independence
- Free flows of information
- Freedom of expression.

1- Media independence

It is rightfully recognized that independent media is cornerstones for stable and peaceful societies. Therefore, there is a growing consensus that independent media within each nation are cornerstones for buttressing democratic transitions and consolidation, by contributing towards the right of access information, freedom of expression, accountability of governments, along with cater to the citizens, and their legitimate claims. In this context, Jeffersonian stated: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter". Therefore, the positive relationship between the growth of the free media and the process of democratization is thought to be reciprocal. As Carey (1996) states: "Journalism is another name for democracy or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy. The practices of journalism are not self-justifying; rather, they are justified in terms of the social consequences they engender, namely the constitution of a democratic social order".

Moreover, numerous observers have emphasized that a free media are valuable for democracy, and for human development. In other words, "media necessarily form an essential part for the democratization of state and civil society across the Middle East and North Africa just as they have in the uprisings themselves" (Cottle, 2011, p.657). Therefore, independent and revised media are most

important requirement in the Egypt's post-uprising phase. Further, all forms of media" newspapers, radio, television stations, independent newspapers, private television channels" should facilitate greater transparency by providing a civic forum for multiple voices in public debate which was not possible during thirty years of authoritarian rule.

2- Free flow of information

There is widespread agreement among researchers that free flow of information generally viewed as one of fundamental requirements of democracy. Habermas (1989, cited in Haider, 2009, p.4) suggests that with greater access to information comes greater participation in democratic process. In fact, new digital media platforms have provided multi-directional platforms for disseminating information and sharing of content without the substantial cost or without the media gatekeepers, implying that, "the power to control information no longer resides exclusively with the institutions of the state." (Howard, 2011, p. 20).

In this context, Mats, 2010 state that: "In the new media landscape, including online communication, the distribution of news and information is not controlled by traditional mass media institutions to the extent that it has been. The traditional concept of news distribution and the power of gate-keeping journalists are partly challenged." (p. 47).

As mentioned above, one of the more attractive attributes of new social media is its transforming individuals from passive consumers of content to active producers (Nov et al., 2010), implying that, all citizens can produce the information and share it among themselves. Further, the people themselves can play a role in determining the flow of information. In that sense, interactive nature emerges as the most significant innovations in the new media (Flew & Humphreys, 2005), and this makes communicating and connecting between people easier and more efficient, particularly in active participants in political events. In that sense, new media are found to be critical to the humans (Durden, Hill, & Angel, 2007), due to that " humans are societal and require relationships in order to

survive" (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008, p. 13).

3- Freedom of expression

According to General Assembly of the United Nations and Convention for the Protection of Human Rights declared: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers ...", we can say, that there cannot be a democratic society without the fundamental right to freedom of expression, because the progress of any society depend not only on the possibility of receiving information, but also depend on information sharing and its discussions. Thus freedom of expression is one of the essential foundations of a democratic society. In this sense, Freedom of expression provides the citizens with the right to participate to common life and ensures their capacity to contribute in action. In Egypt, censorship and state-control on media still are common practices toward reducing freedom of expression. The penal code provides for fines and imprisonment in case of criticism of national or foreign governments, for diffusing news against the public security, and journalists are frequently subject to violence. On the other hand, the government owns controlling shares in the three largest newspapers (Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar and Al-Gomhuria), at the same time, the Ministry of Information controls content in the state-owned broadcast media.

Constraints of democratic transition in Egypt

1- Transition from state control to private ownership

After Hosni Mubarak was toppled in 2011, for example, scores of TV channels sprang up in Egypt, which allow citizens exposure to a wider variety of cultural products and ideas. In this context, we have seen that autocracy transition from the state control "official censorship and control of information" to private ownership. In other words, some of these mass media have been used to undermine democracy by the process sowing divisiveness and among the citizens, and rival political groups. The result was "sacrificing

news objectivity" and hushing up the facts.

2- Lack of Confidence

Despite that trust is one of pillars media ethics, and one of the major elements of its legitimacy, but the trust in the Egyptian current media offerings including traditional and online media declining. It is worth noting that, credibility crisis or lack of confidence emerged during the 2011 revolution, due to the distorted coverage of the uprising by state owned media, in particular the national Egyptian television's, which played down the protests, and did not reflect an accurate picture of the event itself, while drew attention to the pro-Mubarak rallies. In this respect, Idle and Nunns (2011) stated that "The importance of citizen journalists cannot be overestimated in a country like Egypt with a state controlled media. One of the features of the uprising was the gradual undermining of state TV and newspapers, to the extent that journalists began to resign as the public saw the ludicrous coverage for what it was. Also, instrumental in this process was the contrast provided by transnational satellite TV channels, like Al Jazeera, whose reporting was often influenced by information and footage coming from citizen journalists on the ground" (p. 20).

In this perspective, the public until now is clearly dissatisfied with the traditional media offerings. For instance, a majority of Egyptian don't trust many news sources and the accuracy of reporting, because they believe that the news is unduly influenced by powerful business and political interests who play into the media's own desire to make profits.

On the other hand, media landscape has changed dramatically with the arrival of Web 2.0 technologies, which leading to rise of user-generated content (UGC) on the World Wide Web. Indeed, user-generated content (UGC) covers a various forms of media content (written, audio, visual, and combined) that are publically available and created by end-users. Moreover, it require convergence of the roles of the professional and the simple user, integration of different media channels, content enrichment based on shared media experiences and social interaction.

Since then, it has become difficult to

check the credibility of online information— in light of unique features such a lack of constraints to publishing, in addition to the inability of the legislative framework for regulation and control of online content through censorship and blocking (Ali & Hassoun, 2011). In this sense, assessing credibility of media in a content-rich environment is often much more complicated than in previous media contexts as Sundar (2008) noted:

"While an assessment of [. . .] simple cues was feasible in traditional media, it is next to impossible for an average Internet user to have a well-defined sense of the credibility of various sources and message categories on the Web because of the multiplicity of sources embedded in the numerous layers of online dissemination of content" (p. 74).

Conclusion

Recent revolutions, which collectively referred to as "the Arab Spring" have demonstrated that the Arab world countries until now have seen the birth of a "fourth wave of democratization"— particularly with the collapse of authoritarianism in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. In the context of the January 25 revolution, the platforms of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, was absolutely critical that provided swiftness in receiving and disseminating information; increased interaction among protesters; energize civil society; mobilization and the organization protesters around the world, as well as rallying international support. In other words, these new media platforms had played an important role in creating the collective consciousness of the general public. For instance, Attia et al (2011) point out that the information obtained from these sites had formed positive attitudes of younger generation toward political change during Egypt's revolution. Besides, the adoption of SNSs as a new communication tool have enabled marketers to reach a target audience without the substantial cost or without the media gatekeepers in ways that are very different from traditional media (Owen & Humphrey, 2009). In this sense, Ekström, 2008 state that:

"In the new media landscape, including online communication, the distribution of

news and information is not controlled by traditional mass media institutions to the extent that it has been. The traditional concept of news distribution and the power of gate-keeping journalists are partly challenged." (p.47).

Thus, we must recognized that "new media" are rapidly becoming as powerful tools not only for community building and identity formation, but also provide the capacity to overcome state control of traditional media and enabling citizen journalism.

Despite the unprecedented opportunities posed by new media to creating the collective consciousness of the general public, and improve communication substantially under the citizens' fear of speaking out, but certainly they are not the only factor in implementing recent Arab revolts. Besides, democratizing potential of these digital platforms is largely unrealized. Thus, we need to:

1- Rethink the role of the new media in achieving and advancing democratization.

Indeed, this is the question arises under lack of a real participation in the election processes that recently conducted for positive change.

2- Conduct applied research into the interrelationships between new media and democratization in Egypt, and relate the findings to the practice of journalism and other forms of communication.

3- Publish such research for use by different publics (e.g., academics, practitioners, activists, policy makers, and the general public).

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