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## **Changing Revolutions, Changing Attention? Comparing Danish Press Coverage of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Syria**

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**Abstract:** The Arab Spring has generated unprecedented attention to the Arab world in Western news media. This paper presents a comparative study of Danish press coverage of the uprisings in Tunisia and Syria during the early months of the Arab Spring (January-March 2011). The study is based on a mixed quantitative and qualitative content analysis aimed at identifying patterns of news reporting of the Arab Spring. The investigation looks into whether temporal developments of the Arab revolutions, the level of journalistic presence in the region, and national differences influence Danish press coverage of the Arab Spring.

The findings indicate that media coverage of the Arab Spring points in different directions. On the one hand there has been a remarkable increase in media attention to the Middle East in purely quantitative terms. On the other hand the study finds that a number of traditional media patterns persist, not least in relation to media perceptions of Islam and democracy, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the ability to reform the Arab world from the inside.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, news media, Danish press, news reporting, content analysis, Syria, Tunisia

### **The Arab Spring: Old and New Media Patterns**

A prominent feature of the Arab Spring has been the importance attributed the media in reporting, sustaining and inspiring the various Arab uprisings. From an early point, regional and international news media were reporting intensely from the protests, creating international attention to the conflicts and inspiring people in neighbouring countries. In this respect the Arab Spring resembles other recent mediated “revolutions” such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), or the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon (2005). During the Arab Spring the media took on further significance as it not only involved the presence of news media, but also the possibilities of social media in organizing protests, mobilising the public and bypassing official channels of

information. For that reason the Arab Spring has been hailed as a social media revolution, partly anticipated by the so-called *Twitter* revolution in Iran 2009.

However, the media perspective of the Arab Spring extends well beyond the Arab region and the role of participatory media. Another feature of the Arab Spring is the unprecedented attention to the Arab region in Western media reports. Never before has the region been subject to such intense press coverage in traditional as well as new media (e-news, mobile news). What remains to be seen is whether this new(s) pattern is the by-product of yet another mediatized revolution, or a token of more permanent changes in media attention to the Arab world.

The news flow during the Arab Spring has varied greatly in intensity and focus. These variations are due both to the nature of the press but also to national differences in the Arab region. This article looks at how these variations play out in the press and to what extent they are revealing underlying news patterns. What do they tell us about the press and the way they deal with major social and political unrest in a region traditionally considered secondary to European concerns? Are we witnessing new patterns of international news or is it business as usual?

The article presents a comparative investigation of Danish press coverage of the uprising in Tunisia and Syria from January to March 2011. The two countries represent rather different cases, both in terms of political development and media coverage. While the revolution in Tunisia developed successfully and came to an end in less than a month – taking the news media by surprise and leaving them rather unprepared for the task – Syria represents a different case. At the time of the first serious protests in Syria (March 2011), the revolution in Tunisia was already over, the Egyptian president had just been ousted, and the rebelling in Libya was fast unfolding. Thus, at this point in time, the media were deeply involved in reporting the Arab Spring and communicating about the Arab world.

In terms of western political interests, the two countries also differ considerably. For decades, Tunisia had been regarded as an ally of the West, not least because of its (repressive) policy towards political Islam and African immigrants heading for Europe. Syria, on the other hand, has traditionally been regarded with suspicion if not downright animosity due to its Baathist ideology, anti-Israeli position, support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups, as well as its close relations to Iran.

The rationale for doing a comparative analysis is therefore to investigate whether temporal developments of the Arab Spring, levels of journalistic presence in the region, and differences in western perception of Arab nations influence Danish press coverage of the Arab Spring.

## **News of the Arab World: Selecting Stories and Sources**

The Arab Spring has already become subject to numerous books, articles, and reports, which deal with the particularities of the Arab Spring, i.e. the specific historical circumstances and events during the Arab revolutions in 2011. Some publications have focused on the relation between media and the Arab revolutions (Peterson, 2011), not least on the role and function of new media in organising and mobilising the civil society (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Mourtada & Salem, 2011). However, as this study is concerned with Danish press reports on the Arab Spring it draws primarily on more general accounts of the news media as an institution, theories of news selection, and the use of news sources in relation to non-Western countries.

News production is an institutionalised process, which transforms human, social and natural events into system-specific communicative operations by the mass media (Luhmann, 1996). At the centre of these operations are selections of news stories and news sources, that is, practises of choosing which aspects of reality to represent, and who gets to speak in the media. These questions become all the more important when dealing with marginal areas and voices such as non-Western regions and people (Hafez, 2005). In fact, early theories of news selection were developed precisely in order to understand the mechanisms that govern media attention to non-Western countries (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Golding, 1980). In a similar vein a whole range of studies have documented the unbalanced use and representation of non-Western sources in Western news media (Poole & Richardson, 2006). While some of these studies are far from being new they are describing mechanisms that are still at play, not least in relation to western media representations of the Arab world (Pintak, 2006; Shaheen, 2006).

Setting the agenda by selecting news topics and sources belongs to the more obvious routines of news media. Shaping these agendas through the emphasis on certain aspects or the use of certain rhetorical devices is a further but less obvious operation of news production. Identifying and operationalizing such media frames (Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) – sometimes and somewhat controversially referred to as “second order agenda setting” (McCombs, 2004; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997) – is still a subject of theoretical and methodological disputes, regardless of its wide application (Borah, 2011; D'Angelo, 2002). Framing theory, nevertheless, represents a model to conceptualize how media operations tend to downplay or emphasis aspects of a perceived reality, thereby offering interpretative frames in which to present complex events such as the Arab Spring.

## Research Design: Context Analysis of Danish Press Reports

The article presents a mixed quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Altheide, 1996). Although quantitative content analysis has traditionally been associated with hypothesis-testing strategies, there is a growing awareness that quantitative methods may also serve more explorative purposes (Bryman, 2008, p. 595ff.). The present study revolves around loosely formulated research questions, while at the same running and comparing correlations in order to explore differences in media strategies and media coverage. Designed as a comparative analysis, this study is less concerned with testing theoretical assumptions than investigating *patterns of news reporting* of the Arab Spring.

The quantitative part of the analysis is concerned with two research questions:

*RQ1: What are the differences in press attention to the uprising in Syria and Tunisia in terms of news composition and news priorities?*

*RQ2: Are there any significant temporal developments in press coverage of the Arab Spring?*

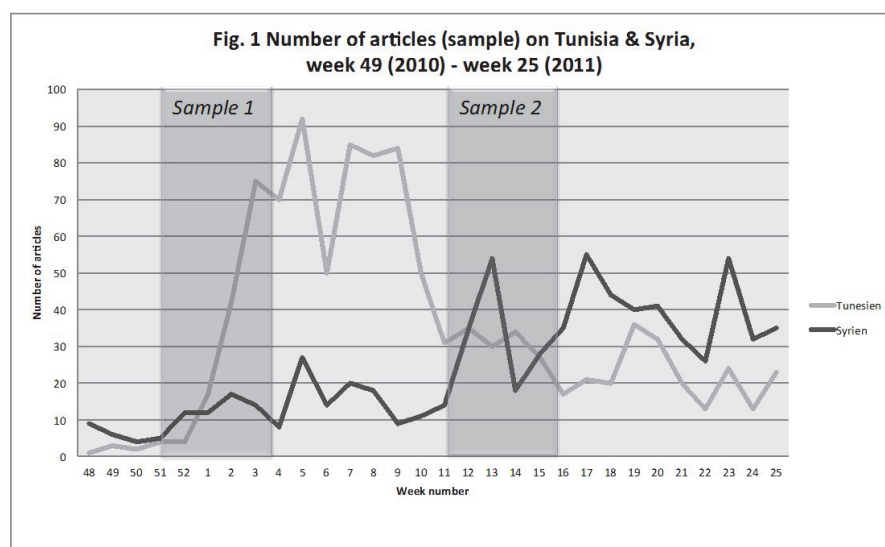
To answer these questions articles have primarily been coded for variables in relation to news composition, editorial priorities, news producers, location of journalists, numbers and types of sources, as well as major news themes. In so far inferential statistics are employed, an alpha level of .05 is used for all statistical tests.

The qualitative part looks at how the differences and developments in media attention play out on a semantic level, exploring how the Danish press is framing protests in Tunisia and Syria; how it participates in constructing images of national differences; and how these constructions relate to the commercial and ideological context of the Danish press. Methodologically this part draws on qualitative content analysis, which is not concerned with single documents but multiple documents in relation to context and process (Altheide, 1987, 1996). This includes the particular format and logic of media text (e.g. press reports), as well as the emergent pattern of messages and meanings that “become more clear through constant comparison and investigation of documents over a period of time” (Altheide, 1996, 10). While this part draws on the preceding quantitative analysis it rests on a reading rather than quantification of content.

Data consist of four Danish newspapers; one tabloid (*BT*) and three “quality papers” representing the political spectrum of the Danish press, from centre (*Politiken*) and centre-right (*Jyllandsposten*) to centre-left (*Information*). Together these papers represent approximately half of Danish national dailies in terms of circulation (52%) and titles (44%) (DDF, 2011). Articles have been sampled using an electronic database of Danish newspapers (*Infomedia*),

searching for the keywords “Syria” and “Tunisia” (n=245).<sup>1</sup>

Stratified sampling strategies based on composite weeks are normally recommended for newspaper studies (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 2009 [1993]; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). However, as this study has been designed as a comparative study of media coverage of two specific periods during the Arab Spring, it is based on a consecutive sample of the first month of protests in Tunisia (20.12.2010-20.01.2011), and the first month of protests in Syria (16.03.2011-16.04.2011). In Tunisia protests followed the self-immolation of Mohammad Bouazizi in mid-December 2010. In Syria there were sporadic protests in February and early March 2011, but the first major day of simultaneous protests took place on 15 March. Thus, these two sampling periods coincide with the first substantial media attention to Tunisia and Syria as illustrated in figure 1.



## Results: Danish Press Coverage of the Arab Spring

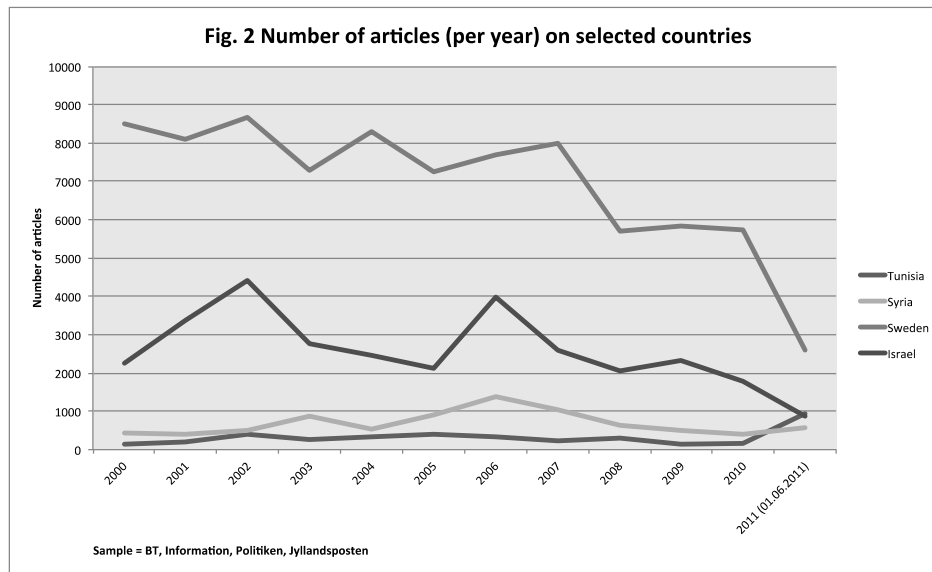
### *The Media Context of the Arab Spring: Changing a Familiar Pattern?*

2011 has been an extraordinary year when it comes to news reports from the Middle East. The Arab Spring has turned traditional news patterns upside down. For the first time in a decade – perhaps ever – countries like Syria and Tunisia receive the same attention as regional “elite” nations like Turkey or Israel.

Normally, Syria and Tunisia are sources of marginal news in Danish press, as illustrated in figure 2. According to both classical and recent theories of news selection (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neil, 2001), the marginalisation of Arab countries can be explained with a lack of cultural proximity. As a

<sup>1</sup>*Infomedia* offers the possibility of searching in PDF or HTML versions of printed articles, the former being the most accurate method. However, coding PDF versions are considerably more time consuming. Thus, for practical reasons the present study has relied on a sample of html versions.

consequence, reports about the Middle East are often associated with negative news (e.g. deadly events, acts of violence or terror); violation of social norms (e.g. excessive richness, religion or sexuality); or moments of occasional cultural proximity related to news on sports, tourism or terror.



In fact, the very first articles on Tunisia were all about sports (Denmark facing Tunisia in handball); Tunisia as a popular tourist destination; and terror (Danish and Swedish police arresting Swedish citizens with Tunisian background suspected of planning an act of terror against *Jyllandsposten*, the Danish newspaper that published the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005).

This marginal position *and* perception of the Middle East was clearly expressed in some of the early Western reactions to the protests in Tunisia. These early comments revealed how fundamentally, and for how long time, the Middle East has been regarded as a region where traditional political values do not apply, or are at best irrelevant. The best-known example is the French Foreign Ministers' comment that French expertise could help tackle the protests in Tunisia (*Information* 15.01.2011).

On a more modest scale a few Danish comments revealed a similar cynicism and opportunism towards the Middle East as illustrated in the following quotes by a director of a Danish travel company, and by a director in Danish Industries (DI), a major Danish interest groups:

Unless the situation in Tunisia rapidly stabilises, close to 30.000 danes will have to change their travel plans, according to Stig Elling, director of marketing in Star Tours, a travel company. »It is a real pity for Tunisia. It has become a major destination for many Danes, but now sales has come to a complete halt« (BT 16.01.2011, p. 5)

»But it is a pity, that it happens, as Tunisia was becoming a country with a certain potential as a market for Danish industries. We actually had a conference in December on the possibilities in Tunisia«, says Peter Thagesen, director of commercial policy in the interest group DI (*Jyllandsposten* 18.01.2011).

The word “pity” surfaces in both quotes. While the reference frame for the pity is Danish, it is nevertheless presented as a pity *for Tunisia*, rather than for Danish tourists or Danish industries. Critical Discourse Analysis describes such rhetorical devices as a re-contextualization of social events or a conversion of the subject of events (Fairclough, 2003).

### *Tuning in on the Arab Spring: News Stories and News Frames*

Media attention to the Arab Spring is an example of a news topic that suddenly gained momentum. At the beginning of the protests in Tunisia in December 2010 and early January 2011, news reports were almost absent in Danish media. In fact, extensive Danish media coverage only took off at about the time that Ben-Ali left the country.

That picture radically changed when protests in Syria began. Table 1 shows how the first wave of protests in Syria received more press coverage than the early revolution in Tunisia. It also shows that news coverage was more focused as there were fewer articles coded as marginal (i.e. containing only superficial references to the country). An important difference is the increase in secondary articles about Syria. The reason is that Syria was mentioned in a number of articles about the development of the Arab Spring, such as the situation in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, but also in relation to the UN resolution on a no-fly zone in Libya, which coincided with the first protests in Syria.

**Table 1: Level of attention/importance of articles**

ARTICLES	TUNISIA		SYRIA	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Primary</i>	59	53.2%	73	54.5%
<i>Secondary</i>	12	10.8%	33	24.6%
<i>Peripheral</i>	40	36.0%	28	20.9%
<i>All</i>	111	100%	134	100%

$\chi^2 (245) = 11.43, p < 0.05$

A closer look at articles that deal explicitly with the situation in the Middle East (excluding articles on sports and tourism) reveals a pattern of news topics that differs significantly between the two countries (cf. table 2). Regarding Syria, there has been a high focus on protests and social unrest, as the Syrian conflict has not come to an end. In Tunisia, on the other hand, the focus rapidly shifted from issues of protests to questions of democracy, as Ben-Ali’s sudden resignation opened up possibilities for political and constitutional reforms.

**Table 2: Middle East themes in Danish press on Tunisia and Syria**

ARTICLES	TUNISIA		SYRIA	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Democracy</i>	33	37.5%	29	21.3%
<i>Unrest</i>	34	38.6%	82	60.3%
<i>Social conditions</i>	13	14.8%	5	3.7%
<i>New media</i>	8	9.1%	4	2.9%
<i>Sectarianism</i>	0	0%	16	11.8%
<i>All</i>	88	100%	136	100%

$\chi^2 (224) = 32.20, p < 0.001$

These two news themes are to a large extent reflecting the development “on the ground”, in so far as demonstrations continued in Syria while being replaced by issues of democracy in Tunisia. However, there are other types of news stories that reflect more analytical and editorial concerns. Issues of sectarianism regarding Syria, and social conditions regarding Tunisia, represent deliberative attempts to present the protests and underlying conflicts in Syria and Tunisia within a more specific news frame. It is therefore no coincidence that news of social unrest and democracy often dominate news reports provided by international news agencies, whereas articles on sectarianism and social conditions feature prominently in news analyses, background articles and editorials.

Obviously, the point is not to argue that sectarianism or social conditions are irrelevant in relation to Syria and Tunisia. Although there are divergent views on how politically important Syria’s ethnic and religious mix really is (Perthes, 2004a, 2004b), it is quite evident that sectarian tensions are a matter of concern compared to the more homogeneous Tunisia (it is less evident, however, why social conditions in Syria should be so massively overshadowed by issues of sectarian divisions). What is suggested is that the press, by focusing on sectarianism or social conditions, cultivates certain interpretative frames, which are reproduced in successive news reports, thereby becoming dominant ways of presenting the protests and underlying conflicts. At the same time, these news frames help to differentiate between national variations of the Arab Spring.

In other words, sectarianism and social conditions constitute potent news frames that offer a whole package of storylines, interpretations and predictions. There are different conceptualisations of such “interpretative packages” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). One version is Entman’s definition of a news frame as the result of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 1993, 52). Thus, frames represent a structuring of news in a more comprehensible way. Table 3 presents a simplified “frame matrix” (Gorp, 2007, 72) that illustrates how sectarianism in Syria and social conditions in



Tunisia serve as news frames that offer problem definitions, interpretations of causes and consequences, moral evaluations and treatment recommendations in relation to the Arab Spring.

**Table 3: Frame matrix of news frames related to Tunisia and Syria<sup>2</sup>**

NEWS FRAME	SOCIAL CONDITIONS (TUNISIA)	SECTARIANISM (SYRIA)
<i>Problem definition</i>	<p>“The 26 years old Mohamed Bouazizi, who died of his burns on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, has now become a symbol in Tunisia. Like tens of thousands other young people he had a good education, but no job, and now the patience of the young is over” (<i>Politiken</i> 07.01.2011).</p> <p>“It is a spontaneous uprising by (...) students and young people with an education. They have had a hard time, because of high unemployment (...). The young demands jobs and protests against corruption” (<i>Jyllandsposten</i> 14.01.2011).</p>	<p>“The crisis in Syria has, like the crisis in Bahrain, a sectarian touch” (<i>Jyllandsposten</i> 28.03.2011).</p> <p>“His [Bashar Al-Assad] radius of decisions does not reach longer than the alawite security chiefs, who according to an old agreement leaves politics to the president, but not the administration hereof. Those people regard any forthcoming by the president toward the opposition as worse than high treason, namely as deserting the clan” (<i>Information</i> 28.03.2011).</p>
<i>Causal interpretation</i>	<p>“According to Ole Wøhlers Olsen, former ambassador in the region, the uprising is not politically motivated, but the reformists taking advantage of the situation. »There is a socio-economic frustration among the young people, who can't imagine any future opportunities. It is not a political uprising, but those people, who have long worked for political reforms, are now riding the wave», is his assessment” (<i>Jyllandsposten</i> 14.01.2011).</p>	<p>“A revolution in Syria will affect the entire Arab ‘fertile crescent’: Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. For instance, it was remarkable that the Lebanese leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, praised the Arab uprising – without mentioning Syria with a single word” (<i>Information</i> 24.03.2011).</p>
<i>Moral evaluation</i>	<p>“Fear of ‘Islamists’ cannot legitimize continued dictatorship” (<i>Politiken</i> 13.03.2011).</p> <p>“The uprising in Tunisia reveals Europe’s hypocrisy” (Headline, <i>Information</i> 15.01.2011).</p>	
<i>Treatment recommendation</i>	<p>“A swift democratic election; effectively monitored by international observers. (...) Tunisia has the potential to become a democratic and secular nation in the Arab world, but the international community has to act fast, if it shall succeed in breaking the pattern in this part of the world, in which democracy and human rights are systematically oppressed” (<i>Jyllandsposten</i> 19.01.2011).</p>	<p>“Syria’s president is the key to peace. USA and Israel see no alternative to Assad in Syria” (Headline <i>Politiken</i> 03.04.2011).</p>

There are two points to be made about this table. First, when it comes to interpreting the consequences of the popular uprising in Syria, the press is less concerned with the effects on Syrians and more concerned with some of Syria’s neighbouring countries (Israel, Lebanon). This indicates that while the Arab Spring has changed some press patterns in relation to the Middle East (offering a more extensive coverage of the Arab world in general), other well-known patterns apparently persist, not least the longstanding tendency to offer Israeli perspectives on Middle Eastern affairs a prominent place (Mayhew & Adams, 2006 [1975]; Philo & Berry, 2006). For instance, in a news analysis *Politiken* warns that the true concern in the Middle East is less the development in North Africa but Syria’s influence in the region: “While the attention of NATO and the US is focused on the development in Libya, which only has peripheral relevance to Western security

<sup>2</sup>Translations by the author.

policy, something is happening in Syria, which may have critical influence on war and peace in the region” (*Politiken* 03.04.2011).

Second, contrary to the situation in Tunisia, which resulted in critical self-examination of Western hypocrisy, the press have been less enthusiastic about assessing the moral implications of the Syrian situation. Framing the Syrian conflict as sectarian is a simple way to define and interpret the protests. But drawing moral conclusions from Syrian sectarianism is not as simple as offering moral self-critique of 30 years of Western cynicism towards political and social oppression in Tunisia. This is no doubt due to the highly complex situation of Syria. But it also indicates that the press is very much in line with the whole political establishment, which is itself somewhat paralysed by the complexity of the Syrian case (Cavatorta, 2011; Leverett, 2005).

For sure there are moral issues related to the Syrian conflict. But these have mainly been raised in op-ed pieces concerned with domestic issues. For instance, a letter-to-the-editor points out how the media are describing the brutal crackdown of Syrian protests, while at the same time ignoring how Denmark is deporting Kurds to the cruel treatment of the same Syrian authorities (*Information* 25.03.2011).

In Tunisia things were relatively simple. For three decades the media and the political system had turned a blind eye to the Ben-Ali regime. His sudden fall from power resulted in critique of political hypocrisy towards authoritarian regimes in North Africa as well as the media industry’s own accomplice. As a columnist wrote in *Politiken*: “Why do we have this inclination to ‘understand’ the dictators in the Arab world? Why are our democratic governments more patient with the oppressors than their victims?” (*Politiken* 13.01.2011).

In Syria things are more complicated, including the West’s shifting positions toward the country. Syria’s interference in other countries (Lebanon, Iraq) has over the years been criticized as well as ignored. Syria’s long time partnership with Iran and Hezbollah and its animosity with the former Baathist regime in Iraq only highlights the West’s own problematic relations to Iran, Lebanon and Saddam Hussein. But most importantly, Syria’s central role in the Arab-Israeli conflict underlines a delicate dilemma of the West; on the one hand supporting the democratic aspirations in the Arab world, while on the other hand fearing the Arab Spring might compromise Israel’s security (despite little evidence, so far, to support this assumption). The media’s silence on these issues either seems to indicate a tacitly acceptance of these assumptions, or a more general disinclination to challenge consensus on a highly politicized issue.

### *Ideological Variations*

Taking the historical and commercial context of the sample into account, it turns out that while newspapers tend to frame the protests in Tunisia and Syria in a similar way (cf. table 3), ideological nuances are also at play. Taking Tunisia as an

example, there are marked differences in how the newspapers present the causes and implications of the Tunisian revolution.

In 2005 *Jyllandsposten* published 12 cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, resulting in worldwide protest and the biggest international crises Denmark has faced in recent history. According to *Jyllandsposten*, the publications were a symbolic defence of the freedom of speech against alleged totalitarian tendencies associated with increased Islamic influence in Western Europe. Ever since, *Jyllandsposten* has been rather persistent in their focus on Islam and democracy, lending support to the view that Islam is more or less incompatible with democracy. The same concern surfaces in *Jyllandsposten's* editorials on the situation in Tunisia:

“The excitement of the development in Tunisia is comprehensible, as the fall of dictators is always worth celebrating. However, there are no guarantees that Tunisia is now moving towards democracy in a Western sense. Islamists are already busy occupying the power vacuum, which the flight of Ben Ali has created. Their advance can only be avoided by swift democratic elections (*Jyllandsposten* 19.01.2011).

At the other end of the ideological spectrum is the left-leaning newspaper *Information* where the uprising in Tunisia is seen as an example of the inadequacies of global capitalism. In an article on the return of the global “systemic crisis”, the paper claims that:

“We have been here before (...). ‘The world is facing a price chock on foodstuffs. We are entering dangerous grounds’, according to the leading economist in FAO (...). And the fact is (...) that these days we are registering the first popular protests and violent clashes with the authorities as a consequence of increasing prices on provisions and costs of living. There are reports of casualties following street-fights in both Algeria and Tunisia” (*Information* 13.01.2011).

Finally, the tabloid paper *BT* adheres to an “ideology of the popular”, which regards foreign news as mostly irrelevant. And *when* reported, it is primarily done in a dramatized manner as in the following quote from an article (entitled “Revolution in the desert”) consisting of more or less related metaphors:

“The Arab uprising already started in Tunisia back in December 2011. Here, the 26 years old greengrocer Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in an act of protest. This became the spark that ignited a fire of anger, which spread like a bush fire across the Arab deserts. A revolution was born” (*BT*, 25.03.2011).

It should be noticed, however, that metaphoric descriptions, regarded as communicative tools for rendering unusual events intelligible, is not reserved for the tabloid press, although the latter's use of metaphors might be less subtle. *Information*, a distinctly intellectual daily, compares the Tunisian protests with the revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989, describing Tunisian security forces as “North Africa's stasi”, and Ben Ali as “Ceausescu of the desert” (*Information* 17.01.2011).

*Social Media – New Sources of Information*

Since attention to social media has been a recurrent feature in media coverage of the Arab Spring, this study has coded all references to new media such as Twitter and Facebook. Unlike the other news themes (democracy, unrest) and news frames (social conditions, sectarianism), which differed significantly between the two countries, the difference in attention to social media is not quite statistically significant ( $p=0.0663$ ; FET). It indicates that social media is a less country specific news topic compared to, for instance, sectarianism.

However, attention to social media is interesting in other respects. First, it indicates to what extent social media were regarded a contributing factor in organising civic society during the Arab Spring, although the attributed importance has most likely been exaggerated by the news media (Marks, 2011).

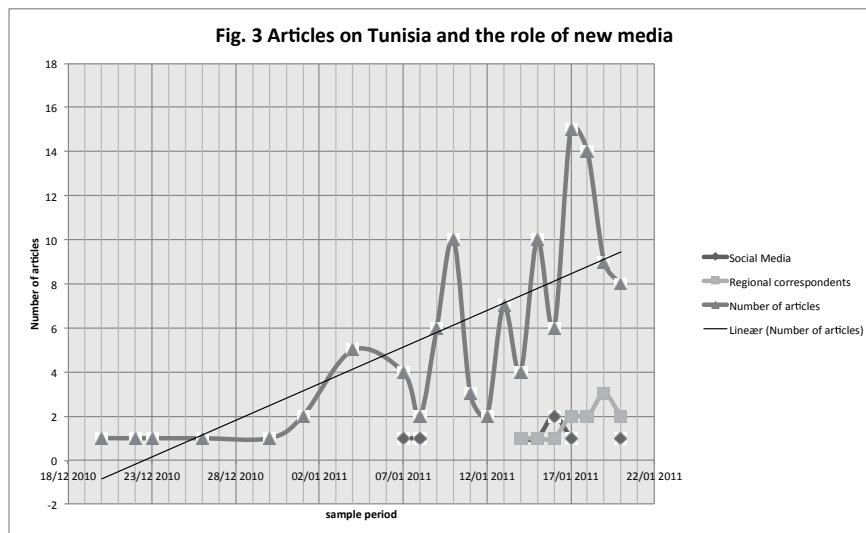
Second, and perhaps more significantly, social media represent a new source of information for the traditional news media. Not least when considering that most news reports on the Arab Spring are produced outside the region, especially during its first stages (cf. table 4). Under these circumstances, social media (especially blogs and tweets) have proven to be an important source of information in terms of updates, but also in terms of access to individual sources.

**Table 4: By-lined articles produced in-/outside the Middle East**

ARTICLES	TUNISIA		SYRIA	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Inside region</i>	12	21%	35	37%
<i>Outside region</i>	45	79%	59	63%
<i>All</i>	57	100%	94	100%

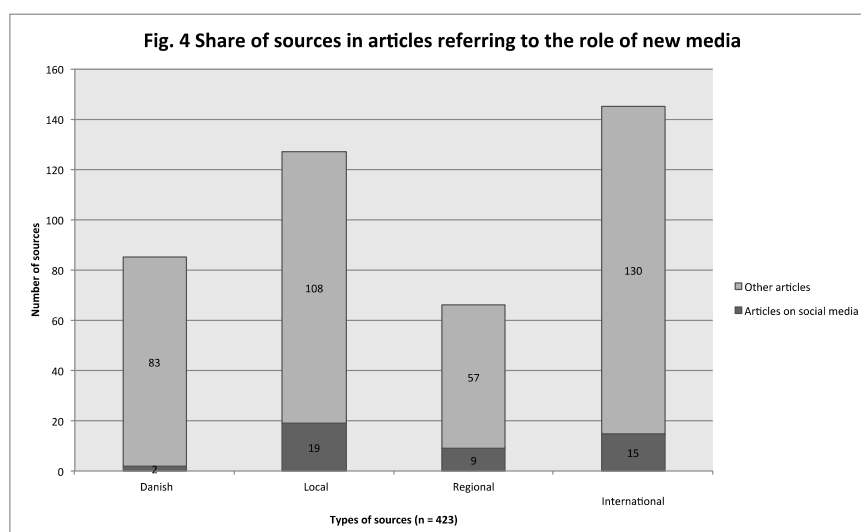
$\chi^2 (151) = 4.33, p < 0.05$

The relation between journalistic presence in the region and reference to social media is further investigated in figure 4. It shows the number of all articles on Tunisia produced in the first sample period. But it also specifies how many of these articles that are produced in the region by Danish correspondents as well the number of articles referring to or quoting from social media. The figure indicates that as soon as the press picked up on the events in Tunisia, references to social media became part of the news flow. However, the moment correspondents were reporting on the ground, attention to social media tends to wane. In fact, this tendency is even more pronounced than indicated in figure 3. The figure shows the number of by-lined newspaper articles produced in the region. However, in the beginning these articles were written and researched from correspondents outside Tunisia, mainly from Beirut. It was only during the very last days of the Ben Ali regime, that Danish journalists actually reported from inside Tunisia. And at that point, social media became a marginal news topic.



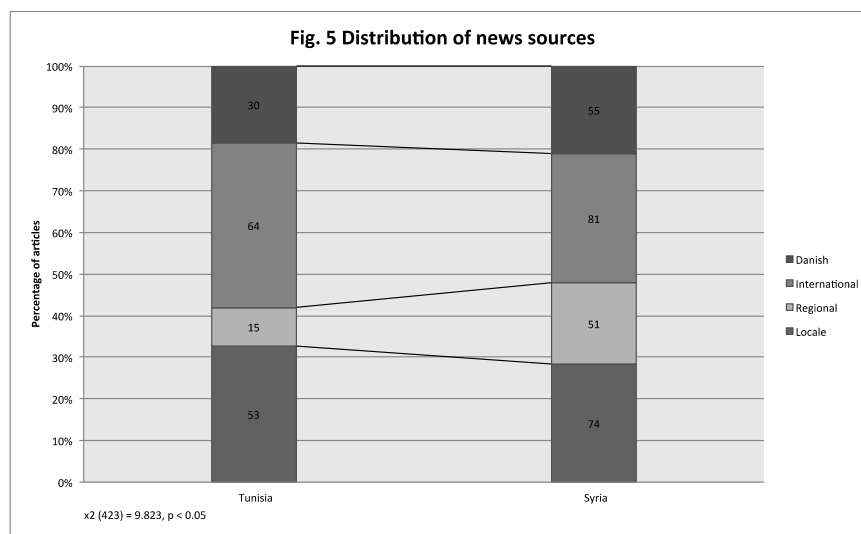
The situation in regards to Syria has been somewhat similar. As journalists have been denied access to the country (leaving some journalists to report anonymous from the country, see for instance *Politiken* 31.03, 01.04.2011), references to social media have functioned as a substitute for interviewing local sources.

Thus, one of the important consequences of the press paying attention to social media is the increase in representations of "local" sources. This is illustrated in figure 5, which shows the share of news sources (Danish, local, regional or international) referring to social media during the protests in Syria and Tunisia. It shows that roughly 15% of local sources appear in articles dealing with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. In other words, without articles referring to or quoting from social media there would be considerable less local sources in news reports on the Arab Spring. Taken together, figure 4 and 5 indicate that Danish newspapers used social media as a compensation for more traditional news sources as long as field reports by correspondents were not available.



Given the composition of sources in relation to the Arab Spring this is an interesting finding. First, it indicates that social media has become a news source

on a par with more traditional sources. Second, it challenges the tendency of using international (often non-Arabic) sources and experts to comment on Arabic conditions, thereby indicating alternative journalistic practises. As demonstrated in figure 6, press reports about Syria, and especially Tunisia, are dominated by either international or Danish sources. Thus, less than half of all sources (n= 423) are located in the Middle East, although the picture improves slightly during the coverage of Syria. Without quoting social media the percentage of local and regional sources would be even lower. While the use of social media as news sources is far from unproblematic (cf. the difficulties of checking information from independent sources) it nevertheless provides an opportunity to expand the number of sources, getting access to military sealed areas, bypassing official channels and giving voice to ordinary people experiencing the Arab Spring first hand.



## Comparisons and Predictions: How the Press Presents Individual Countries

Framing theory points out that moral evaluations and treatment recommendations can be part of the media's framing practice. Closely related to this type of assessment is the tendency to offer predictions of the likely outcome of a given social event. Prognostications represent an attractive way to fixate the unknown and uncertain, and to create suspense about future developments. It carries the further advantage of allowing day-to-day adjustments and the opportunity of presenting new and unexpected scenarios.

Predictions about the development of the Arab Spring seem to be based on a similar pattern of establishing national differences and similarities as the premises on which future courses of events are extrapolated (cf. table 5). In Tunisia, the uprising was mainly framed as the outcome of demographic and social conditions, as pointed out above. Historically, this situation has resulted in a young, well-educated but unemployed population with a bleak view of the future due to various factors such as low economic growth, rising commodity prices, corruption and

authoritarianism. When protests erupted they were presented as an unpredicted, but to some extent logical consequence of this demographic condition. In this respect Tunisia has been compared with other North African nations with a similar demographic structure.

At the same time, Tunisia was presented as special and incomparable with other Arab countries. Tunisia was described as more secular, having a high level of education, building on close relations to Europe, and being reasonably developed in comparison with other Arab countries. But unlike its oil-rich neighbours (in North Africa and the Gulf), Tunisia was not able to quell the protests by buying support through subsidies. For all those reasons the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia was regarded as a “one time phenomenon” (*Information* 19.01.2011); an assessment that was echoed in other newspapers (*Jyllandsposten* 16.01.2011; *Politiken* 18.01.2011).

Like Tunisia, Syria was constantly compared to other Arab nations in order to predict the consequences of the Arab Spring in Syria. But unlike Tunisia, the focus was on formal parallels, rather than social or demographic similarities. Thus, the Syrian regime’s handling of the uprising was seen as repeating the pattern of other regimes, shifting between promises of political reforms and crackdown on protesters by security forces.

Syria, however, was also presented as special and less likely to be affected by the Arab Spring. Descriptions like “the Syrian case” (*Information* 28.03.2011) or “the Syrian variation” (*Politiken* 28.03.2011) surround predictions of how the Arab Spring “will stop at the Syrian border” (*Jyllandsposten* 26.03.2011). The main reasons given are that the Syrian president has been less unpopular than his Arab colleagues. For one, Bashar Al-Assad’s long-term support for “resistance” (towards Israel) is seen as bolstering his public support. Sectarian reasons, like Christian support for a minority president, and the difficulties of creating a united opposition across sectarian divisions were also mentioned. Finally, the size, brutality, and shrewdness of Syria’s security forces were further seen as preventing the Arab Spring from reaching Syria.

**Table 5: Predictions related to news frames and national parallels/differences**

	NEWS FRAMES	NATIONAL PARALLELS IN RELATION TO THE ARAB SPRING	NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN RELATION TO THE ARAB SPRING
<i>Tunisia</i>	Social conditions =>International implications (refugees + Islam/democracy)	Youth unemployment; social protests against price rise & corruption (demographic parallels)	Tunisia = special => revolution will not spread
<i>Syria</i>	Sectarianism =>Regional consequences (security & power: Israel, Lebanon, Iran)	Reactions of Syrian authorities follow patterns of Arab Spring (formal parallels)	Syria = special => revolution will not reach Syria

This did not prevent the press from speculating in possible outcomes of the Syrian uprising. But as pointed out earlier, these speculations were associated with the framing of the Syrian conflict as sectarian and closely associated with regional power struggles (Iranian support to Syria, Syrian interests in Lebanon) as well as the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

What is important is not that the press (and the quoted experts) were wrong in predicting the development of the Arab Spring. More important is the nature of these predictions, namely the tendency of foreseeing failure for a popular revolution to take hold across the Arab world. It tells us more about the prognostications and interpretative frames of the media, than about the nature of the Arab Spring. To Danish media, it was apparently inconceivable that the Arab world could be reformed from the inside; that the region would be home to popular protests that would defeat even the brutality of (Western-backed) regimes, overcome religious fanaticism, minimise sectarian tensions, spread across an entire region – and all of this without igniting the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This is not particularly new of course. The tradition of looking on the Arab world as passive, backward, and antithetic to social change has a long history, according to studies of orientalism (Lockman, 2004; Said, 1995 [1978], 1997). Nevertheless, the most surprising thing about the Arab Spring is not that the media were taken by surprise, exaggerating the role of social media, or making wrong predictions about the Arab Spring, but rather how such traditional perceptions and notions of the Arab world would survive, inform and to some extent colour news coverage of such a revolutionizing event.

On the other hand it must be recognized that social media have somewhat challenged this news pattern. By making room for new sources, witnessing actions unfolding almost instantly and offering first hand experiences social media are potentially offering an alternative picture of the Arab Spring. This is a picture of an active, engaged and forward-looking public equipped with modern information technology and aspiring for justice and social change. While this picture may contradict traditional news frames of the Arab world, it is not unusual finding competing news frames in the press. After all the media are constantly adapting to new conditions and changes in the surroundings. One can speculate, however, whether it is unusual that it requires events on such a massive scale like the Arab Spring to bring about changes in news patterns.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest that media coverage of the Arab Spring points in different directions. Apparently, it takes a major social upheaval like the Arab Spring to challenge traditional patterns of media attention to the Middle East. From a quantitative perspective, the Arab Spring has resulted in a high frequency



of press reports about the Middle East, covering a broad spectrum of themes, including social conditions, new media, relations between religion and democracy apart from the more traditional themes of violence, terrorism and international politics. In this respect the Arab Spring has led to a more balanced attention to the geographic and social composition of the region. However, the qualitative analysis indicates that in a number of cases traditional media patterns seems to persist, not least in relation to the implications of the Arab Spring on Islam and democracy; the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the somewhat stereotyped perceptions of Arab politics that seems to surround predictions about the Arab Spring. As these patterns tend to reflect editorial and ideological orientations they are less affected by particular social and political events like the Arab Spring and therefore co-exist with the quantitative changes in media attention.

An important exception to this pattern is the role and function of social media. The study suggests that social media has become a new source in newspaper reporting, albeit mostly employed when traditional field reports from correspondents are unavailable. This practice may nevertheless have added more local voices to the press coverage of the Arab Spring, considering that news reports from the Middle East traditionally have been marked by international rather than local and regional sources. Finally, references and quotes from social media may offer a different picture of the Middle East, which to some extent challenge preconceived notions and perceptions of the Arab world and its social and political dynamics.

Whether these new media patterns will outlast the Arab Spring is too early to conclude. Further studies will have to trace the developments of media attention to the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. But one can certainly hope that the Arab Spring not only represents a historical opportunity for the Arab world, but also an opportunity for Danish (and Western) media to confront new and former practices concerning media attention to the Middle East.

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