

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB SPRING UPRISINGS

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Abstract

This Research seeks to answer several questions as follows: Did social media play a key role in the Arab Spring uprisings? The significance of the research is linked to the novelty of the topic which is globally yet debatable. Few serious issues are taken into consideration in this research including: social media, new technology and the nature of its role in the Arab uprisings. Social media tools were a good medium of electronic communication among protesters in MENA region. Furthermore, it was a vital medium for spreading information such as photos, videos and documents about the revolution for national, regional and international spheres. This research seeks to find out about the link and impact of social media on the Arab Uprisings. Based on controversial scholars' arguments, this study appeals that social media can have both positive and negative influences on the 'Arab uprisings'

Keywords: Social Media, Arab Spring, New Technology, Online Uprising.

1. Introduction

The years 2010- 2011 can be considered as the golden years for social media or 'New media', as well as for a number of Arab countries. New media changed its role from spreading information about events in the world to a significant facilitator that plays a serious role in the political actions against governments in the Arab world. It has been suggested that social media played a vital role in toppling down authoritarian governments in the Arab World. As, Revolution spreads to other states in the region and it is claimed that many of these have been activated by the social media².

Concerning, "the term of 'Arab Spring' came from the American media and was first used by *Foreign Policy Magazine* and then adopted by journalists and activists in the U.S. as a way to brand the revolution that has been transforming the Middle East and North Africa (MENA³) region." [1]. Importantly, Tunisia was the catalyst for the Arab Spring. People joined demonstrations and many young people in different countries in the region followed the uprisings through social media.

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2. (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) define social networking sites (SNS) as "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system."

3. MENA Region: The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a region encompassing approximately 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Accordingly, "in December 2010, a man in Tunisia burned himself to death in protest at his treatment by police. What followed was an extraordinary year as pro-democracy rebellions erupted across the Middle East." [2]. Likewise, in 2011 The Telegraph reported that on 17th December 2010 in Tunisia, the Arab Spring was born and after approximately one month of demonstrations, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali⁴, who ruled the country for 24 years, escaped the country. Soon after, on 11th February 2011 the uprisings moved to Egypt and protesters broke down Hosni Mubarak's⁵ regime in a month; Mubarak had led the country for 30 years. Then, on 15th February 2011, the revolution started in Libya against the Muammar Gaddafi⁶ regime and it spread to Bahrain on 14th March 2011. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Gulf States sent troops into Bahrain to support the Sunni Sheikh Hamad bin Isa⁷ Al Khalifah kingship after a revolt by the kingdom's subjugated Shia majority. Subsequently, Syria was the fifth Arab country in the region that continues to face strong demonstrations from the Syrian public. On 18th March 2011, troops loyal to President Bashar al-Assad⁸ killed five demonstrators in the southern city of Deraa and the revolt has not reached its purpose yet. Finally, Yemen was the last country in the region to join the Arab Spring. On 3rd June 2011, Yemenis started the uprising against President Ali Abdullah Saleh⁹; on the same day he was injured in a bomb attack on his palace in the capital of the country Sana'a. The attack came after the killing of hundreds of protesters by his troops.

Hintler explains in recent years, social media has become popular everywhere. As such, it has an impact on social lives because it has achieved an important position in social life. Through social media, people connect with each other and transfer and share information. Before the end of 2012, people, in most countries used social media like Facebook for entertainment and business. In line with this, Samuel in his thesis in 2012 focuses on the role of Facebook and Twitter in the Egyptian uprising. [3]

There are locations where Facebook has become the means for building mobilisation and arranging activities against political systems in the Arab world, for instance in Egypt. Furthermore, Hintler indicates that today, social media has a greater influence on audiences than old-media and it is assisted by new technology because new social media keeps in touch with the new developments in the world. The Internet can be used to access all kinds of mass media like radio, newspapers, magazines and television, for example, protesters used social media because they could upload videos, photos, documents, audios and posts. Moreover, "the Arab Spring has been covered by ordinary citizens via social media and it was more effective than the mainstream media, and

4. Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali led Tunisia for 23 years before stepping down in January 2011 amid an unprecedented wave of street protests.

5. Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt for almost 30 years until he was swept from power in a wave of mass protests in February 2011.

⁶ Muammar Gaddafi has been Africa's and the Arab world's longest-ruling, most erratic, most grimly fascinating leader - for 42 years of Libya. On June 27, the brutal actions of the government were referred to the International Criminal Court, and an arrest warrant for Gaddafi was issued for crimes against humanity.

7. Sheikh Ḥamad ibn 'Isā Āl Khalīfah, (born Jan. 28, 1950, Rifā', Bahrain), king of Bahrain from 2002, previously emir of Bahrain (1999–2002). Ḥamad became head of state as the emir of Bahrain after the 1999 death of his father, Sheikh 'Isā ibn Sulmān Āl Khalīfah, and then proclaimed himself king in 2002.

8. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad inherited power in July 2000, a month after his father, military strongman Hafez al-Assad died. But since March 2011, his rule over Syria has been under threat.

9. Ali Abdullah Saleh has proved to be one of the Arab world's most tenacious leaders, projecting a statesman-like, even affable, image in the face of popular opposition, in sharp contrast to some of his counterparts during the "Arab Spring".

according to the Arab Social Media Report, 2011, 88% of Egyptians gain their news from social media tools." [4].

2. The Impact of Social Media in Middle Eastern Political Changes

Many scholars believe that social media tools were the main factors for collapsing a number of Arab regimes like in the case of Egypt and Tunisia; however, others do not agree with this view.

In his book *The Net Delusion* Evgeny Morozov states that several countries in the world just want to promote democracy and freedom via online methods, but it is not a real platform for giving freedom to the people, as some countries use the Internet to conduct surveillance of their people. He thus believes that authoritarians use the Internet, particularly social media, for spying instead of giving freedom. In essence, his negative view comes from his country of origin, Belarus, because he strongly believes that non-democratic countries do not allow people or internet corporations to give freedom via online methods. For example, Belarus and Russian governments have arrested number of youth during the protests in the past and the important point is that they knew everything about their activities. In other words, authoritarian governments can benefit from using social media than ordinary people because they conduct surveillance of the users especially at the time of uprisings. [5].

So far throughout the course of all revolutions, there is no conflict about the reasons of the revolutions anywhere in the world. The main factors are economic or political. He argues that the modern revolutions are different, as mostly they depend on new means. Communications and information technology was the most effective factors in the modern revolutions in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. Those means were used to communicate the political issues.

More importantly, the power of social media has great impact in many cases in history. Sometimes protesters' success, such as in Spain in 2004, when an organised demonstration was fostered by text messaging, which led to a rapid ousting of Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, who inaccurately blamed the Madrid transit bombings on Basque Separatists. In many cases, technological devices such as mobile phones are the reason for a fall of a party or a regime, for example the situation in 2009 when the Communist party lost power in Moldova, while the public protests were organised by text messages.[Ibid].

Moreover, shedding a light on the June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran, in which protesters and activists had used many technological devices for coordinating a protest against the miscounting of the votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi. When social media presents a demonstrable threat to government, and leading parties, the protests were cracked down violently in Iran similar to the case in Syria. As, "mobile phone is another activities tool that has not been subjected to thorough security analysis. While it has been rightly heralded as the key tool for organising, especially in countries where access to the internet and computers is prohibitively expensive, little has been told about the risks inherent to most 'mobile activism' although, the governments can shut down mobile networks whenever they find it politically expedient." [6].

Regarding the role of social media in the recent Arab Spring various thoughts have been stated in the literature. Considering the role of Facebook in the Egyptian revolution was not just gathering people but was raising more awareness among people, in which angry people wakened others about the political and economic situation in the country. In one way or another, the internet can be an effective social media tool for fostering a pan-Arab broadcasting process in the Arab world. An

interesting case is Facebook, which was first introduced in Arabic Language in March 2009 and quickly, the number of Facebook users in Egypt grew up to five million users. And, following, the protests aggravated. It is worth mentioning the essential factor that made Facebook popular among dissidents was that it allowed them to spread the videos they captured and at the same time see what other people published on Facebook walls. Therefore, Facebook was a platform where many protesters could watch current events, besides a place where everyone gets information via friends. [7].

To some extent, social media has become the most influential coordinating tool for many political movements in the world. That is why many governments are working to get power to control the Internet access. People everywhere can get access to the Internet easily, and almost all people can use it. As it is illustrated, nowadays social media is used by many people as a means for commerce and social life. Many authoritarian regimes have tried to restrict communications in their communities since they are afraid of the public reaction, as the public mostly reacts rapidly in many cases. Further, the communicative power is very influential for political freedom; however, some governments do oppose it. At present, the main tool for communication in the world is the Internet in which understanding local protests are hard for outsiders. [8]. Fortunately, throughout the Middle East the main place where many civilians could express their anger was on Facebook. In some cases, in the Middle East people engaged in using the Internet in protests, that "the Internet is more important and disruptive than [its greatest advocates] have previously theorised". Actually, the way the protests were organised in Egypt was effective in gathering people, and transmitting information via Facebook and other social media tools. The protest organisers were leaders of the revolution, in a way they could use influential strategies in leading and forming groups on Facebook to participate in the revolution. Significantly, the true skill of leadership has been used in Facebook for changing Mubarak's regime. In this context, it is not strange to see Twitter and Facebook as new tools for political movements in the Middle East, as in the present century many people are continually using social media and it is the easiest channel for getting information. [9].

Even though the regimes have also power to control the Internet and social media outlets access, this had given a reason for regimes to take precautions in risk management. That was why many Internet companies were forced to shut down when the protest aggravated. That means social media was a realistic threat and the Egyptian government wanted to mitigate it. The formulation of the revolution inspired many people to take part because this gave normal people the opportunity to take part equally.

Social Media and the democratisation process have nearly gone together, and the power of social media is parallel with the invention of technology, referring back to technological tools that have been used in the past such as telegraph and radio. These were the main tools for social communications and the main factor for transferring information in communities. These tools have been used in political actions in the past.

In his argument, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, said that the printing press helped democratise Europe by providing space for discussion and agreement among politically engaged citizens, often before the state had fully democratised.). Indeed, the interlink between political freedom and mass media is an attractive issue, as the sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld revealed, the mass media alone does not have enough power to change the public mind-set, but they further concentrate on a two-step process. [10].

Apparently, people can use the Internet and social media; however, not like the government, as people have the power to use technology but the governments can use the power of law. The government is capable and in place to ban the Internet access in many countries. For example Chinese and Russian governments have announced the Internet-search services as a "strategic industry" like energy and other economic resources in which the governments have the right to ban foreign companies.

Furthermore, "the Internet does not play an essential role in Middle Eastern democratic revolutions compared with other factors, like the new procedures that the new leaders do take, such as the new constitution and the principles of the previous government." Consequently, the dispute about the social media is a further negative since the Internet or social media may have a limited effect on revolutions. The main factor that pushes people to revolt is the economic factor; people use the social media to cast their grieves and social problems and to let the world know about their suffering. Social media lets the revolutionary events take place in a short time; this was a very fast way of revolting against a government in power. [Ibid].

The view that have shown that in Egypt the government was not capable to control Facebook or ban it, since civilians had the desire to engage in protests and to know about what happened and what will happen as a next step. That was the way communication continued i.e. via Facebook pages, using mobile phone and other devices. Subsequently, Facebook become a platform for political discussions for many people, the online protesters were much more interested in spreading videos, which showed violent action against human beings, such as torture, abuse, human right violations. Compared to the Tunisian protest, the Egyptian physical protesters were fewer in number. [11].

3. The Role of Online Communication via Social Media and the mainstream media

To put it simply, the current age is known as a digital era, which changes the style of modern life, and their activities particularly in some parts of the world in which democracy does not exist. Thus, media and modern tools of social communication played a vital role in political life, supporting democracy and loyalty to freedom of expression. Moreover, social media such as Facebook and Twitter encouraged people and prepared masses to join the uprisings, for example in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, and short mobile messages have played a great role in moving the revolt in Yemen. Modern technology has a significant role in progressing revolts because it assisted young people to turn on Facebook via their smart phones and upload live posts, pictures and videos among the protesters particularly in Egypt. [12].

Moreover, the role of social media has changed since 2011. Owing to its role in uprisings in the Arab world, the social media was a decent tool for protesters, as they arranged activities against regimes and thereby changed some government systems with the help of social media. On the other hand, 2011 was an excellent year for social media from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and finally Syria because of the "Arab Spring". [13]. Contrariwise, in the Egyptian revolt Twitter played an essential role as it was used outside of Egypt to spread information about the uprising; and other types of media like radio and TV such as Al Jazeera and Ham radio have affected the Arab spring uprisings. Above all, the demonstrations were continuing after shutting down online communication via social media and mobile phones because the protesters have an offline tool: the mosques; however, there are misgivings about the facility of activists. Postill states that "Both old and new, analogue and digital – from Twitter and Facebook to graffiti and leaflets through broadcast media such as radio and television. Social media appears to have been important tool

during the preparation and launching of the Day of Anger (25 Jan), but they were so alongside email, mobile phones, leaflets, television, radio, print media and face-to-face." [Ibid].

Worth mentioning that all kinds of social media had an effective role during the uprisings such as in Tunisia, Twitter had a crucial role and over 30,000 videos have been uploaded on YouTube about the revolutions. Basically, the demonstrators depend on social media, for instance Facebook and Twitter, to spread information about events and to motivate people to participate in the revolutions. In Tunisia people have created a Facebook page to write about the revolts motto "Ben Ali, out", they choose Facebook as a main step for starting the uprising against Ben Ali. [14]. Adding, "Facebook was the drive of this revolution. Everybody was on Facebook, if these protests started five years ago, they would have died." [15]. Indeed, "the number of tweets from Egypt went from 2,300 to 230,000 in the week leading to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak." [16].

The regimes did not predict the power of social media until the protesters used it against them. In an effort to explain, Shane argues that dictators use the traditional tools to stay in power but the protestors have been using the modern tools of communication against regimes in the Arab world to defeat them as they did in Egypt and Tunisia. Hence, President Hosni Mubarak believed that Facebook and Twitter might empower his enemies. Additionally, Shane believes that using social media during the Arab Spring uprisings is more helpful than using force because protestors televised the revolutions by themselves and the world can see the dark side of dictators in the Arab world. [17].

However, some experts consider that social media has been just a tool that protesters used to communicate with each other. In this concern, some Egyptian protestors were cautious about using the social media especially Facebook and Twitter because they feared that their enemies could use social media as anonymous to identify the activists and that is why they preferred to use photocopies and e-mails as well. [18]. In line with this, social media assisted the Arabs to discover that revolutions were starting in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. [19]. Doctor Hisham Gheriani in his clinic in Benghazi said that social media like Facebook was really helpful because it made Arabs overseas realise what was going on in their home countries and some returned home to help the revolution. Whereas, the social media was important but not all-important because, it does not make the uprisings, but influenced some real things like unemployment and the violence of police with the protestors has a great impact on uprisings too.

4. How important was the Role Social Media played in the Arab Spring?

The golden argument of this paper is 'what role did social media play in the Arab spring?' At this point, an attempt will be made to try and explain the nature of the Arab Spring and its characteristics. It anticipates that some distinguishing points of this matter are as follows: it is occurring in the age of the technology and information; it occurs against local and national authorities –not foreign authorities, and some of the main motivations are the gap between the new and old generation, the cases of human rights and the issues of the economy and corruption. Moreover, there is global interest and universal support for the Arab uprisings and the role of the universal channels is considerable.

In this manner, the role of social media will be explained, for instance Facebook and Twitter in the Arab Spring. It is claimed that the social media can be an effective tool for activism, in particular, when combined with other digital technologies. Besides, it can be beneficial for individuals and small groups with few resources, as well as organisations and coalitions that are large or well-

funded. It facilitates such activities as educating the public and media, raising money, forming coalitions across geographical boundaries, distributing petitions and action alerts, and planning and coordinating events on a regional or international level. [20].

In other words, that the debates about the effect of social media would be greatly overrated if held responsible for initiating the civil unrest and demonstrations in Egypt. What it did, was enable the organic nature of non-hierarchical leadership to emerge in a highly visible manner. Civil unrest and episodic protests in Egypt existed before. Social media is a lightening-speed communication tool, and permits the immediate and simultaneous dissemination of information for like-minded groups of individuals. The opportunity to influence the opinions and actions of others occurs at an unparalleled rate of speed. But technology is a tool, a way for mobilising movements, not the reason for civil upheaval. Besides, several conditions-social, political and economic - converged to ignite the discontent of the citizens of Egypt. The technologically savvy leaders were tuned into the times, accurately read the emotional state of the public and seized the opportunity to channel the ever-growing discontent into a massive protest. [21].

Leadership in the information age will have to use the available tools to communicate meaning and equip others to engage in constructive problem solving. Even though, some users can misuse the power of the Internet; therefore, the leaders have to be clear about what it means to be constructive in communicating. Accordingly, Scott does not believe that social networking will put a leader in power. Interestingly, everyone is able to post something on the Internet, as in reality the Internet, particularly social media, is a tool that brings about opinions, discussions, and proposals. Since leaders of small groups may find the Internet useful, whereas the leaders of countries do only enjoy the Internet to listen to the public or, "the readiness of a group or culture to act". Nevertheless, Preston states that in a letter to Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, mentioned that the events in Egypt and Tunisia had highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of social tools for democracy and human rights advocates. "I am concerned that the company does not have sufficient safeguards in place for protecting human rights besides to avoid being exploited by repressive governments." [22]. And, Elliot Schrage, the vice president for global communications, publicity and marketing at Facebook, declined to discuss Facebook's role in the recent tumult and what it might mean for the company's services. For Schrage, the brave people of all ages come together to effect a profound change in their countries, and technology has been just a tool for assisting the events.

To evaluate the recent Arab upheaval without the character of social media, predominantly Facebook and Twitter, would lead it definitely one-sided. Above all, according to ibnlive.in.com "it is possible that in the commencement of the revolution, the Egyptian youths could not talk about making uprising against the regime but after what happened in Tunisia, they created Facebook pages and groups. They also tried to gather people in order to join the demonstrations because poverty and unemployment were the main reasons for a group of four people to set themselves on fire. [23]. Moreover, the Egyptians created some Facebook pages and most of the page slogans were about poverty and unemployment such as "The day of the uprising against poverty", "dishonesty and Agony" hence before the day of the revolution more than 80,000 people promised through Facebook to join the demonstrations against Mubarak's regime. [24].

Predominantly, another viewpoint was social media did not emancipate people to collaborate but helped the public to communicate. In particular, the educated people in Egypt to utter their words about the revolution. Actually, social media is a revolutionary tool in today's world that brought up new voices and ideas to the world. Moreover, as it's a factor for changing the political and social

arenas in many countries. On the other hand, Francis Fukuyama, political scientist scholar, states "the Egyptian community was very brave to work on changing the rigid political system of the regime, and did bravely protest and demonstrate, while they could not continue for having a candidate or leader to take part in the election in the country." Thus, Friedman considers social media as a sharp movement in Egypt but that they could not get an outstanding outcome from it. [25].

5. The Role of the New Technology in the Arab Spring

Alongside with social media, new technology like the mobile phone played an important role in the recent Arab uprisings. As, every activist carried mobile phones and in every corner in Tahrir square protesters used phones for taking photos of the demonstration, and the mobile users has grown rapidly to 80% in Egypt in the past years. As well, millions of Egyptians filmed the uprisings, and some of satellite channels used that footage. [26]. There is no doubt that we are at a pivotal moment in history, in which technological devices had improved rapidly as can be seen in Egyptian case. Mobile phones became a documentary device that could gather information and record events of the revolution in the MENA region. In addition, protestors for exchange of information easily and properly used mobile phones as a technological device and protestors did contact each other via phones. Additionally, transferring news to the outside world was made by mobile phones mostly; therefore Facebook becomes a dominant host in Egypt. No matter how good technological devices are, still there are many people who do believe that social media was not too effective in the Arab spring particularly in Egyptian case. [27]

While, authority had restricted assessing the Internet and mobile phones, the protesters have used their hacking capacity for hacking the web pages and network connections to reach each other and publish information on the events. More interestingly, "Anonymous" group published a warning message over the networks which mentioned that the Egypt government had to let people have access to the Internet, otherwise the group would hack the governmental web pages. As a result, after five days, many people had a chance to get back their net access.

In addition to the mentioned views "the youth groups could get benefit from new technology and technical services including social media, besides an organising mechanism for the group of protesters, mobile phones could be used as a device for photo taking and connections. Besides, reference to the previous revolutions and uprisings of political parties in which newspapers and publications were the only devices for organising their revolutions, like in the Palestine revolution. Besides, the new methods and procedures that new technology does provide people with everywhere without considering the geographical locations is more effective and faster than ever. This fast and easy access of technology helped the public to have connections with revolts, and organisers of revolutions and gave them a global framework in terms of participation, gathering and transfer of information and making connections. [28].

Most importantly, Malath Aumran, a Syrian citizen journalist, told the Christian Science Monitor. "We are telling the regime that if you shoot and kill people the pictures will be online and on television five minutes later." In accordance with this, every day a lot of Syrian people risked their lives to take pictures and films of uprisings by their mobile phones and then upload pictures on social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to show their difficult situation to the world. As the government prevented foreign journalists entering the country. Besides, the regimes fear the social media because last year it helped protestors to defeat dictators in the region, for example in Tunisia and Egypt. [29].

6. Conclusions

On the basis of the aforementioned factors regarding the use of social media and new technology in the recent Arab Uprisings, this study concludes that social media has negative and positive roles in the recent Arab uprisings in the MENA region. An important conclusion is; People have used social media tools like Facebook, particularly in the Egyptian revolution, to collapse former regimes in the region. The users got more advantages than governments because they could not control the revolution as the activists had more than just online resources; for example, they depended on the street and mosques as well.

Another interesting finding of this study is that young people who have high educational level joined the uprisings against regimes and they have used social media as a tool to exchange information and send news, videos and photos of uprisings to the world.

To summarise, it can be said that social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter were the most significant tools for demonstrators for spreading and exchanging information and sending their messages to the world. Conversely, it does not make a revolution alone because it was just a tool, and other factors pushed youths to explore the situation and to make revolutions in the region.

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