SOCIAL MEDIA: IT'S N A T U R E AND INFLUENCE ON ARAB AND EGYPTIAN UPRISINGS

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the various classifications of social media. Nowadays the society is responding with the various happenings through social media. This study shows the impact of social media on the political, social, economic and cultural environment of various countries. This gives a picture on the impact of social media on the democratization process in Arab countries. This also discusses about the role of social media in Egyptian uprisings.
KEYWORDS: *Social media, communication, globalization, Arab countries, Egyptian uprising.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Social media is generally defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Furthermore, social media depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals. Social media differentiates from traditional/industrial media in many aspects such as quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence.

There are many effects that stem from internet usage. It is a fact that internet users continue to spend more time with social media sites than any other type of site. For content contributors, the benefits of participating in social media have gone beyond simply social sharing to building reputation and bringing in career opportunities and monetary income. Due to the increase in social media websites, there seems to be a positive correlation between the usage of such media with cyber bullying, online sexual predators and the decrease in face-to-face interactions.

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OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

1) To know the impact of social media in increasing the reach, frequency and quality of communication
2) To know the change in confidence level of communicators to respond with social issues
3) To know how these medias can be a part in the democratization process on the basis of past experiences that happened with Arab Nations and Egypt

CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Face book is a key example of a social media site, with over one billion active users in the world. Social media technologies take on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, wikis, social networks, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. Technologies include: blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Many of these services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms. By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) Kaplan and Haenlein created a classification scheme in their Business Horizons (2010) article, with six different types of social media: collaborative projects (for example, Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (for example, Twitter), content communities (for example, YouTube and DailyMotion), social networking sites (for example, Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). However, the boundaries between the different types have been increasingly blurred.

MOBILE SOCIAL MEDIA

When social media is used in combination with mobile devices it is called mobile social media. Social media is a group of mobile marketing applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Due to the fact that mobile social media runs on mobile devices, it differentiates from traditional social media as it incorporates new factors such as the current location of the user (location-sensitivity) or the time delay between sending and receiving messages(time-sensitivity). According to Andreas Kaplan, mobile social media applications can be differentiated among four types:

1. Space-timers (location and time sensitive): Exchange of messages with relevance for one specific location at one specific point-in time (e.g., Facebook Places; Foursquare)

2. Space-locators (only location sensitive): Exchange of messages, with relevance for one specific location, which are tagged to a certain place and read later by others (e.g., Yelp; Qype)

3. Quick-timers (only time sensitive): Transfer of traditional social media applications to mobile devices to increase immediacy (e.g., posting Twitter messages or Facebook status updates)

4. Slow-timers (neither location, nor time sensitive): Transfer of traditional social media applications to mobile devices (for example, watching a YouTube video or reading a Wikipedia entry)

RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

All among the world the percentage of social media followers are increasing day by day. People are using social media not only for entertainment but for sharing of ideas, vision,democracy and expression of emotions also. Recent studies show that public can't stay away fromsocial networks for a long time. Table 1 shows the details of internet users who use a social networksite via any device at least once per month. From the table, it is clear that there is an increasing tendency in number of users year after year. In the beginning stage, Europe countries were prominent in the number of social media users than any other countries. But later Middle East andAfrican region are coming in to the main stream of social media at a progressive growth rate till date. There are plenty of reasons for this such as, the cultural, religious, educational and geographical background.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS IN ARAB COUNTRIES (ARAB SPRING)

After analyzing more than 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts, a new study finds that social media played a central role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. Conversations about revolution often preceded major events, and social media has carried inspiring stories of protest across international borders. Social media carried a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for the success of political uprising. People who shared interest in democracy built extensive social networks and organized political action. Social media became a critical part of the toolkit for greater freedom.

The ongoing Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 have fostered a budding dialogue about the role of social media and networking as a tool for political mobilisation towards regime change and pro-democracy movements. Some political pundits, academics and journalists have embraced social media as an undeniable force for good, claiming that, democracy is just a tweet away, or as the oft-quoted Egyptian Google executive Wael Ghonim famously said, "If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet. The Internet has been heralded as an effective weapon of the weak and disenfranchised against their authoritarian leaders, resulting in what 'New York Times' columnist Nicholas Kristof labeled the quintessential 21st-century conflict, in which

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on one side are government thugs firing bullets and on the other side are young protesters firing 'tweets. Even before the Arab Spring, the revolutions in Iran and Moldova were eagerly labeled Twitter revolutions' a phrase the international media has embraced that leads to an impression of a young, hip, and tech-savvy generation overthrowing their archaic authoritarian rulers by monopolizing on the 'digital gap.'[7] However, the excitement from the initial success of the Arab Spring revolutions has led to an overly simplified conclusion about the role of social media and the Internet in fostering revolution. This conclusion relies on some broad assumptions about the democratic nature of the Internet, assumptions that call for a closer examination.

The uprisings that swept across the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011 are still ongoing; only a week ago from the time of writing, Tunisians voted in their first election since ousting President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ten months ago. This was preceded by the violent death of Muammar Qadaffi, an event recorded on mobile phones and personal video cameras, then made accessible to Internet users around the globe via YouTube, emblematic of the citizen journalism that has characterised the coverage of the Arab Spring. Due to the recent nature of these events, the scholarly and academic discourse is still developing, and there is fairly limited data and analysis of the role of social media in the Arab Spring. This is not to imply that there is a lack of information.

What sets the information apart is the nature of its sources: for one of the first times in history the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring have been covered by ordinary citizens via Twitter, Face book, online blogs, and videos on YouTube, more so than the mainstream media. According to the 2011 Arab Social Media Report, 94% of Tunisians get their news from social media tools, as do 88% of Egyptians. Both countries also relied the least on state-sponsored media for their information (at 40% and 36% of people in Tunisia and Egypt respectively). Equally noteworthy, in Egypt there are now more users of Face book than there are subscribers to newspapers.[8] In addition to Twitter, Face book, and YouTube, personal blogs have been used as an insider perspective to the ongoing revolutions. The fact that these tools of social networking that have previously had a reputation strictly for socializing are now being used as sources for information and data speaks volumes of their relevance in contemporary political mobilization.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE 2011 EGYPTIAN UPRISINGS

Though the deposition of Mubarak took a mere 18 days, the oppositional movement that brought him down was a product of a much longer process of planning and buildup, a product of years of repression and disenfranchisement that fomented political mobilization. To analyze any aspect of the Egyptian uprising without this consideration for historical background would lead to a decidedly one-sided conclusion, and when assessing the role of a new phenomenon such as social media, can lead to technological determinism. Rather, this section will place the role of social and digital media within the buildup to the 2011 uprising to emphasize the multitude of factors that

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contributed to the eventual outcome of political mobilization. As Lisa Anderson argues, what is more important than the actual use of technology, is the how and whys that led to the use of technology, in other words, context is key.[9]

Middle East scholar Joel Beinin has calculated that there have been approximately three thousand worker-led protests in Egypt over the last decade, indicative of the latent discontent with Mubarak's regime.[10] Egypt is plagued with a youth-bulge society, unable to provide jobs and benefits for its disproportionally large young demographic. Analysis has shown that in Egypt, unemployment is highest amongst university graduates, a group that is growing quickly and is also the most dependent upon the government for employment. Combined with an aging autocratic leader, and a regime that was increasingly out of touch with the needs of the Egyptian people, this disenfranchised group began to mobilize. The launch of the Egyptian Movement for Change, also known as the Kefaya Movement, in 2004, serves as a starting point for the mobilization of activists against the Mubarak regime. The movement was founded by intellectuals demanding political reform and had limited success mobilizing a critical mass of protesters, and found it especially difficult to reach workers.

This all changed in 2008, when 27-year old human resources coordinator Esraa Abdel Fattah, who has since been dubbed the "Face book Girl," set up a group on the social networking website calling for participation in the April 6 worker strike that was planned for a textile mill in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in the Nile Delta. The group grew to over 70,000 members, 10% of Egypt's active Face book user population at the time. Organized by civil engineer and Kefaya member Ahmed Maher, the strike was protesting the rise in the prices of basic commodities, declining wages, and the fact that even as inflation was becoming an obvious problem, the Egyptian government continued its program of neoliberal privatization. April 6th was the day when organizing tool met political reality to create elements that were strong enough to form storm clouds on the regime's horizon. The result was the formation of a new movement: the April 6 Youth Movement, which has since played a key organizational role in the 2011 protests. It wasn't until two years later in June 2010, when Face book made another appearance on the scene of Egyptian political activism. This time, it was to commemorate the death of a young blogger, Khaled Said who was brutally beaten and killed after allegedly posting an incriminating video of police officers.

In reaction to his murder, Wael Ghonim, the Middle East marketing director for Google, set up the Face book page, We Are All Khaled Said, and publicized the gruesome photos of Said's corpse. The page quickly attracted 500,000 members and soon became a platform for online discussion and dialogue of shared grievances against the Mubarak regime. Wael Ghonim was soon after arrested by Egyptian state police. The protests in Tunisia and fall of the Ben Ali four weeks later provided the spark for Egyptian activists. Not only did the Tunisians provide inspiration, but importantly, they also provided practical advice. According to Ahmed Maher, the civil engineer who led the April 6 worker movement in Egypt, Tunisians sent Egyptians important

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advice like, like use vinegar and onion near one's face, for the tear gas and how to stop a tank. They sent us this advice, and we used it.

Thus social media was used to organize and facilitate the political protests occurring between 25 January, 2011 when protesters gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square by the thousands, and 11 February, 2011 when President Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power. The first large-scale protest on 25 January, dubbed the day of rage by protesters took place on Egypt's National Police Day, a national holiday that commemorates the policemen who lost their lives in the 1952 revolution. For the activists, the Egyptian police force represented repression by the state, the problem of torture and arbitrary arrest symbolizing the corruption and sense of a loss of dignity that cast a shadow over Egyptian society throughout Mubarak's presidency.

According to Al-Jazeera's coverage of the 18-day uprising, protest organizers relied heavily on social media outlets such as Face book and Twitter to organize this initial protest. On 26 January, protests became heated as security forces used teargas to dispel demonstrators. The Egyptian government blocked Face book in the first act of what would eventually become a full Internet blockade. The following day, demonstrations began in Alexandria and Toukh, led by lawyers, proof that the protests were not limited to just one socio-economic class. On the same day Mohammad El Baradei arrived in Egypt to join the protesters, pledging to lead the transition in Egypt. By the 28th, Internet access had been blocked almost entirely across the country. Terrified of the new tools of Twitter and Face book, and the uncensored visual media of yFrog, Flickr and YouTube, the regime chose to pay the price of millions of lost dollars to the economy in order to deprive protesters of a key weapon- the means of communication. The activists who organized the protests had already predicted this response by the Egyptian government.

Despite the Internet blockade, protesters were able to continue organizing demonstrations due to the organizational infrastructure that had already been established. A Face book event, set up days in advance, received tens of thousands of attendance confirmations and a Google document posted to a Face book group collected email addresses of the group's members in case of a blockade. That evening, Mubarak appeared on television, announcing that he had dismissed his entire cabinet, but would be remaining in power. He then proceeded to impose a curfew, to little effect. On the 31st, an estimated 250,000 people gathered in Tahrir Square as Mubarak continued to express his intentions to remain in power. By the 1st of February, it is estimated that nearly one million protesters had gathered in Tahrir Square, while preparations begin for another protest on the following day. On 3 February, security forces open gunfire on the protesters in Tahrir Square, killing at least five. Wael Ghonim was released from state custody on 7 February, bringing thousands more into Tahrir, reaching the highest number in the square by the 8th. Finally, on 11 February, President Mubarak steps down from power, passing ruling power to the army.

In order to fully evaluate the role of social media tools in the period of protests described above, a cross-section of resources were analyzed, ranging from tweets to journalistic articles and academic journals. The following section will outline the roles of social media within

the Egyptian uprising, focusing on three identifiable trends: social media as an organizational tool, as an alternative press and outlet for citizen journalism, and finally as a tool for generating awareness both regionally and internationally.

One of the defining features of the Egyptian uprising is the relative speed with which it occurred. Compared to the uprisings in Tunisia and Libya, which took 28 days and roughly 9 months respectively, the Egyptian activists unseated Mubarak in a mere 18 days, and again, relatively peacefully in comparison to other uprisings in the Arab Spring. Central to the acceleration of events was the efficient use of social media networks as a form of organizational infrastructure that began with virtual networks and was transposed to offline networks. Egyptian activists were able to successfully play off the strengths of the social networking capabilities of Face book and Twitter by capitalizing on their many-to-many communication capabilities and the speed with which information can be transferred and spread, an inherent characteristic to any digital media.

Wael Ghonim's Face book group We Are All Khaled Said served as an organizational platform that attracted like-minded individuals to connect over a common interest to commemorate Khaled Said. This evolved into a common interest in forming an opposition to the Egyptian police force, which evolved into a movement to force Mubarak to step down. Not only did Face book provide the organizational infrastructure, but also it provided a crucial platform for potential protesters to network with one another and shares their common grievances. The page allowed different activist networks, including the April 6 movement, to communicate with one another. Once individuals found out that other people would be protesting, they were more likely to join themselves. Eventually, a tipping point occurs, when the protest or activity becomes self-reinforcing, and increases without further direct organization or action by the leadership.

The activists used other more traditional forms of distributing information, such as handing out fliers on the street. It has been pointed out by some critics that social media cannot be attributed too much credit in spreading information in countries with low Internet penetration, as is the case with most Arab states. However, this ignores the role that social networking online plays in enhancing social networking offline. Every user is a potential re-broadcasted to their own, real-world, social networks, and when Internet use is overwhelmingly concentrated among the young, as it is in most countries with low Internet penetration, there's minimal duplication in the bush telegraph system.[16] The conclusion to be drawn from this example is that successful politically driven social movements must be based on grassroots organization that are started offline and use offline tactics of organization in conjunction with online tactics. Social media were important mostly as a tool for accelerating and facilitating.

With its low entry barriers, social media tools provide an accessible platform for citizen journalism, defined as the use of digital media tools to report on events on the ground, uploading text and videos directly to the Internet or feeding the information and videos to media outlets. The dialogue taking place via Face book, Twitter and other SMNs was used by the

mainstream media as a source during the height of the protests. Al-Jazeera in particular relied on reputed bloggers and Twitter users during the uprisings for real-time coverage of events, by using Sharek, a citizen's media platform that received and filtered through submissions by citizen journalists. The strategy worked by trying to identify key bloggers in countries before protests broke out, informed by the situation in other areas, to act as citizen reporters and then be able to verify information later on. Though there are obvious accuracy issues related to citizen journalism, the implication for the role of social media within the uprising is that it allowed for those directly involved to shape their own narrative and expose themselves to an international audience. Social media place the tools of documentation and truth-telling into the hands of ordinary citizens, SMNs create linked activists who can contest the narrative-crafting and information-controlling capabilities of authoritarian regimes.

The tweets were categorized based on the purpose of their message, and classified as either providing a description of events taking place, as listing the demands of the protesters, as giving instructions for demonstrating, as expressions of solidarity, as asking questions, or as miscellaneous dialogue. Much attention has been paid to the role that the Internet has played in generating awareness of the Arab Spring in both the Middle East and internationally. This is another example of how movements started online were transposed to offline movements where they gained momentum and attention. A poll by The Arab Social Media Report indicated that in Egypt, the majority of Face book users polled agreed that Face book was used most effectively to raise awareness of the causes of the movements within the country. Thus Social media played an important role in formulating this collective shift in social consciousness. According to Slim Amamou, Tunisian blogger and former Secretary of State for Youth and Sport, collective consciousness emerged via the Internet because the Internet is immediate. Thus, cyber-activists were able to capitalize on the accelerating effect of social networking online to formulate a social movement that could be transferred to the offline community and then manifested in political action. Thirty-one year old Egyptian dentist Ahmed Harara is a prime example of just this phenomenon.

A final element to address is the ways in which social media, whether intentionally or unintentionally raised awareness of the ongoing revolution in Egypt in the international community. The need for social networking tools to continue political mobilization was made evident when Western corporations Google and Twitter teamed together to offer "Speak2Tweet" services after President Mubarak shut down Internet access across the nation. Lebanese technology entrepreneur Habib Haddad collaborated with Google and Twitter and organized 1,000 translators to translate Arabic tweets into French, German, and English.88 What is significant here is the involvement of powerful non-state, transnational actors in the domestic politics of Egypt. Up to this point in the uprising no Western state had intervened, but the activists were able to continue their plight against the state with the help of influential digital media corporations.

The role of new media as a source of information in authoritative states is a trend that was recognized by the US government in June 2009, in the wake of controversial elections in

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Iran. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a request to twitter asking that they delay their planned site maintenance, allowing Iranians to continue to communicate via the social network. For the US government, this also meant access to information from Iran, whom the US has had no official diplomatic relations with for three decades.89 Thus social media has played a role as an important source for not only civilians, but also governments in gaining potential diplomatic information.

By analyzing the way the activists utilized the tools of social media through established theories of communication, one can see how the inherent characteristics of social media and the Internet were able to foster the necessary requirements for collective action. However, despite its success in organizing the uprisings, it would seem from the current situation in Egypt that social media has been less useful in translating the needs and demands of protesters into political reality. A further study of the use of social media in Egyptian politics post-uprising could investigate the role of social networking in establishing new political parties or civil society groups, a process that has proven it to be the main obstacle to protesters gaining political legitimacy.

The creators of social media that have been eulogized as liberators in the Arab Spring are given attention by the mainstream media, and treated as experts in the field. In 2009, as a result of the media excitement over Twitter's use in the Green Movement, the micro-blogging site and its creators were being considered for the Nobel Peace Prize, a move that perhaps discredits those individuals behind the social media tools. It is important to remember in any analysis of the Internet and its role in political activism, that throughout history, there have alwaysbeen those individuals willing to decide that enough is enough, and to take the risk of imprisonment, torture or death to stand up to the powers that be and publicly voice their dissent.

The founders of Face book, Twitter, and You Tube did not create their products with the intent of starting revolutions and ousting dictators, and though they may feel they have played a role in the process by providing these vehicles for change, these revolutions begin in the minds and imaginations of those driving them. They choose their tools and their mediums for communication, whether it is print, radio, blogging or just word of mouth, but the strength of a movement lies ultimately in the will for activism. It is just this will for activism that inspired the editors of *Time* Magazine to name its Person of Year for 2011 The Protester, in a tribute to those individuals who made up the revolutionary movements in the Middle East as well as other regions across the globe. Time's choice of the Protester for its prestigious annual accolade captures the zeitgeist of the era in which the Egyptian revolution is taking place, and perhaps even defining.

Thus in conclusion, all that it does, social media is no "silver bullet" when it comes to political change. The use of social media tools – text messaging, e-mail, photo-sharing, social network, and the like – does not have a single preordained outcome. Therefore attempts to outline their effects on political action are too often reduced to dueling anecdotes. Factors that seem to impact its successful use include the size, ethnic diversity, and education levels of the population, the existence of a modern telecommunications infrastructure, and the amount of censorship used

by the existing regime. Social media has limited impact at best on an important factor affecting nascent revolutions – a regime's willingness to use force to squelch protests. Egyptian protests grew because the Army would not turn against citizens engaged in peaceful protest. Iranian protests petered out when leaders used force to crack down on those speaking out, both in public and in the cyber-sphere. Moving forward, the activities of social movements will gain influence only to the extent that they are able to avoid the scrutiny and controls of the state. A challenge forimproving the prospects of digitally-assisted political reform in closed societies that must rely ondecentralized networks is to adapt, emulate and transfer the benefits of highly organized civil society groups, as bottom-up de-centralized organizing is more likely to survive in repressive regimes. Research suggests that protests, when effective, are the end of a process, rather than a replacement for it. Political freedom has to be accompanied by a society literate enough and densely connected enough to discuss the issues presented to the public. The real lesson is that thecyber-verse gives no side a decisive, unassailable advantage. For groups that have felt powerless against repressive regimes, social media's technological leveling of the political playing field provides one of the most important components of any successful revolution.

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TABLE CAPTION

Table 1: Social network user penetration Worldwide, by Region (2011-2014).
TABLE
Table 1: Social network user penetration Worldwide, by Region (2011-2014).

Region	2011	2012	2013	2014
Middle east & Africa	66.7%	74.3%	80.5%	83.8%
Central & Eastern Europe	69.9%	71.9%	74.3%	75.9%
Latin America	65.2%	68.9%	72.4%	74.9%
North America	63.4%	65.6%	66.6%	67.5%
Asia Pacific	52.4%	58.3%	64.2%	68.6%
Western Europe	53.1%	57.9%	61.5%	64.1%
Worldwide	58.2%	63.1%	67.7%	71.1%