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The Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was just that, a spring. It was a spring forward for many countries in the Middle East such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and seventeen others, who fought against their oppressive government regimes to put the power back in the hands of the people. It took the world by storm in January of 2011 and since then spread to countries all over the Middle East. Some people argue that social media did not play a crucial role in the Arab Spring, but rather, a support role. This paper will analyze the effects that social media had on the Arab Spring to gain better insight on whether the role was as powerful as it seemed from the perspectives of critics and proponents of each side of the debate.

Some say that the Arab Spring was years in the making, but its immediate cause all started with one man named Mohammed Bouazizi who was a young merchant in Tunisia. He was told by police that he was not allowed to sell his merchandise without paying a bribe that he could not afford. After the governor declined to hear his grievance, he lit himself on fire in protest. This act of protest caused the revolution to spread to the masses. People began to lash out against their corrupt and oppressive governments that had made living in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria almost impossible. Some of the issues that they faced were high unemployment and poverty rates, low higher education opportunities, and government corruption. The movement was a movement of the youth who used technology against their oppressors in order to defeat them. They did this by utilizing social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in order to organize themselves so that everyone was on the same page, working together towards a common goal. They were able to spread their message not only amongst

themselves, but to people all over the world which helped them gain support for their mission.

Varied Points of View

In the debate about whether social media plays a crucial role in the Arab Spring, there are skeptics and there are believers. One of the skeptics is journalist Malcolm Gladwell who wrote an article titled "Small Change" for The New Yorker. In this article, he outlines two reasons why "the revolution will not be tweeted." He argues that real social change is brought about by "high-risk activism." To prove his point, he gives several different examples of high-risk activism: the sit-ins by black students in Greensboro, North Carolina and the Montgomery boycott organized by Martin Luther King. High-risk activism means that activists have something to lose by rebelling and they have strong ties with each other. Social media, on the other hand leads to weak ties and low-risk activism because people can feel like they are making a difference by simply "liking" something on Facebook or "retweeting" a story. He notes, "Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things people do when they're not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice" (Gladwell). His second argument is that in order for activism to be successful, there needs to be a hierarchy that is organized and has rules and procedures controlled by a central authority. With social media, there is no central leader, so networks "have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals" which makes them "prone to conflict and error." Thus, from Gladwell's point of view, the social media aspect of revolutions is ineffective.

Another skeptic is Evegeny Morozov, a visiting scholar at Stanford University. He argues that because of the immense volume of information that is available through social media at any given time, people are easily distracted and have shorter attention spans, which makes them move on to the next "big thing" more quickly. For example, Twitter was rampant with

information about Iran's unsuccessful uprising in 2009, but that event was surpassed by Michael Jackson's death (Morozov).

Believers of social media's crucial influence are far and wide. A study done by the Dubai School of Government titled the *Arab Social Media Report* which analyzes the impact of social media in the Arab region. The report concludes that the, "growth of social media in the region and the shift in usage trends have played a critical role in mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions, and influencing change." The researchers examined many different aspects of the social media revolutions some of which included growth rate, internet traffic, and demographic and gender changes over time. A survey was done on a group of Egyptians and Tunisians that asked what they mainly used Facebook for during the events in early 2011. Almost 85% of Egyptians and 86% of Tunisians said that they used it to spread awareness, spread information, or organize actions (see Figure 1).

Another proponent of social media's political role is Clay Shirky, a professor at New York University who wrote an article about the power of social media. In this article, he discusses how social media has altered the way that people form their political opinions. Due to the wealth of information available, people are now able to come to a better, well thought out conclusion about their decisions. Social media plays an important role in how they get that information because, "reporting is no longer confined to traditional sources like journalists; instead, social media grants access to unfiltered information related by any person affected by an event who chooses to share the story" (Joseph). It also allows people to receive information about what is going on in a country where repressive governments withhold information.

Positions

Skeptics believe that social media makes people lazy, makes them believe that they are

doing something productive for a cause when they are in fact not. They also believe that it is difficult to get organized without a clear leader. On the opposite side, believers think that social media helps make people get organized into functioning groups that are able to spread their message out to larger groups of people. *Opening Closed Regimes,* a paper on the role of social media during the Arab Spring came to three different conclusions about social media's effect. The first was that "a spike in online revolutionary conversations often preceded major events on the ground," it "helped the revolution spread beyond international borders," and a change in language (the adoption of Arabic by Facebook and Twitter) helped them reach a larger audience and connect with more people (pITPI).

Desired Outcomes

People like Malcolm Gladwell want people to have a more hands-on approach to the revolution because he believes that people that are using social media as their sole means of making a difference will not be able to accomplish as much. He says, "Boycotts and sit-ins and nonviolent confrontations" are high-risk strategies that leave little room for error or conflict (Gladwell).

People such as Clay Shirky want people to continue to utilize social media to their advantage because it helps the outside world know what is happening in their countries and helps spread the message about protests and meetings. The term "slacktivism" (Morozov) describes the idea that people using social media are lazy, but it has been proven, especially with authoritarian governments, that using social media can be dangerous and life threatening.

Advocacy and Best Course of Action

Since a majority of the protesting has concluded in the first countries where the Arab Spring began, social media does not play a role that is as important as it was at the beginning. In

the first few countries, social media helped them spread awareness and organize protests, which

is what helped the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt to succeed. They also had little opposition

from the governments in comparison to places like Libya and Syria. There are currently still

revolutions going on in places like Syria and it is clear that social media is an important resource

for them. So important was social media there that the Syrian government, like that of Egypt's,

cut off Internet in the whole country (Gross). Actions such as this prevent Syrians from sending

news to the outside world about what is occurring and prohibits the exchange of valuable

information.

In the *Arab Social Media Report*, researchers analyzed Internet traffic in Egypt before

and after the blackout, which occurred from January 8th to February 2nd 2011 (DSG). The graph

shows that activity reached approximately the same levels after the blackout was over (See

Figure 2). Some speculate that the blackout ended so quickly because it provoked greater

sympathy for the protesters. It also sparked greater physical participation in the revolution

because going to the "streets was the only way to find out what was happening" (pITPI). Social

media should continue to be used to spread awareness and news, but more reliable routes of

communication should be established because, "social media and the Internet can facilitate

oppression as easily as they can facilitate pro-democracy activism" (Joseph). For example, Syria

now has the Syrian Electronic Army, a pro Assad group that has littered the internet by hacking

people such as "French and US presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Barack Obama, TV talk show

host Oprah Winfrey, and ABC News" Facebook pages "and flooding them with comments like

"we love Bashar al-Assad" and "I live in Syria, stop lying, nothing is happening in Syria" (York).

Due to governments like Libya, Egypt, and Syria cutting off Internet from their people,

the impact of social media is obviously a threat to the authoritarian regimes. Social media works

for precisely the opposite reason that Gladwell stated was a negative. Rather than functioning hierarchically, networks are "bottom-up enterprises" (R.A.). The difficulty with a hierarchical system "is that it breaks easily and catastrophically." This is because if a leader makes a mistake, or "is somehow neutralized," the movement suffers a major setback, whereas a network is difficult to shut down or break.

Conclusion

The Revolutions of the Arab Spring have been largely non-violent and have resulted in the ousting of several authoritative governments. This is due, in part to social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube to communicate messages amongst local participants as well as stimulate an international response. Since the revolutions are still occurring, social media is still playing a role in helping the revolutions. It is difficult, or rather impossible to avoid the pictures of oppressed people that are coming out of places like Syria every day. In this aspect, the effects of social media cannot be denied. Whether they will continue to stimulate a response is still in question.

The Arab Spring though similar, was different in every country. The Tunisians were able to overthrow longtime dictator Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali a few weeks after the protests began. Hosni Mubarak stepped down after just 18 days of mass protest. The revolutions in these two countries were non-violent. However, when the revolution spread to Libya, it became violent and Dictator Muammar Gaddafi was only defeated because of the UN Security Resolution 1973 which called for a "no fly zone" over Libya and for the use of "all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas" (UN Res). An estimated 10,000-20,000 people died in Libya. Similarly, protests became violent in Syria where the revolution is still occurring. Currently death toll estimates 100,000 people have died in the Syrian Civil War, though the

United Nations decided to stop updating the Syrian death tolls due to a lack of information that they were able to get out of the country (Stampler). However, there is a drastic change in social media involvement about what is occurring in Syria, especially from the west compared to the immersion in earlier revolutions. This may be due to several reasons. Firstly, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt started and ended relatively quickly, and they sparked interest because they were a different type of revolution particularly because of the use of social media. Syria is different because the war has been going on since March 2011. This relates to Morozov's claim that people have short attention spans and therefore have moved on to something else.

Social media did and still does play an important role in the Arab revolutions. However, that role has changed due to several factors: time, place, and the type of leader each country has. Social media helped Tunisia and Egypt spread their message to the West and overthrow their dictators by organizing protests and rallies. In Libya, social media helped begin the revolution, but then became more important in communicating information and what was happening instead of organizing. Syria is different because Bashar al- Assad is more prepared than Ben Ali or Mubarak were, and his regime is much more brutal. Social media is still extremely important in Syria because foreign journalists have been virtually banned from the country and rely on news coverage from "citizen journalists and international reporters working with sources inside the country" (Galperin). The use of social media in these revolutions has proven the power of the people against a corrupt government. The Arab Spring revolutions are unlike any other because the ones that succeeded were able to generate a democracy after decades of corrupt government rule through an entirely grassroots social movement.

Appendix

Figure 1

The Main Usage of Facebook during the Civil Movement and Events in Early 2011 was to:

Figure 7: The Main Usage of Facebook during the Civil Movement and Events in Early 2011 was to:
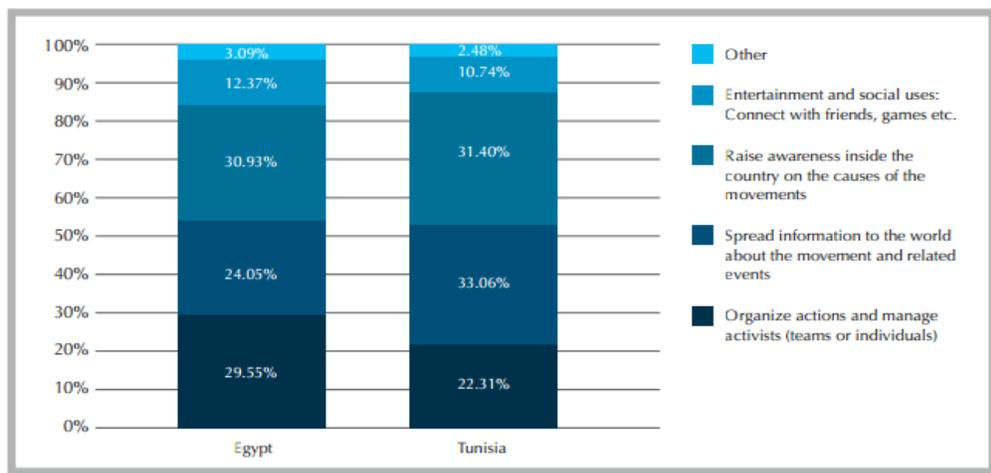

Figure 2

Egypt: Internet Traffic Between January 28 and February 2, 2011- Sample of all GoogleProducts

Figure 3: Egypt: Internet Traffic Between January 28 and February 2, 2011
- Sample of all Google Products[10]

Source: Arab Social Media Report

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