



The Role of Social Media in Arab Spring

Independent Study Research Paper

By

Ahmed Alharbi

Duquesne University

Abstract:

Several protest and revolutions were observed in different areas in the Arab world since 2011 which is recognised as Arab spring term. Social media made the change faster and created a public space to express opinions. Arguably, social media played a significant role in the Arab Spring by making it easy to spread messages, videos, and photos through protesters and then to the entire public. The purpose of this paper is to explain the incidents that are believed to ignite the Arab Spring and then argue for the role of Social Media in Arab Spring. The revolutions in the Arab Spring did not happen because of social media, but social media made it more powerful and efficient. The statistics of social media's users suggest that the Egyptian and Tunisian protesters have used social media for making the revolution more active and widespread. The result of this study indicated that social media has played a significant role in the Arab Spring. Tunisians and Egyptians have used social media to organize and manage their revolution. They used hashtags on Twitter to unite protesters and Facebook pages to make groups and motivate citizens to take the streets. Therefore, in the future, social media at the political level may contribute to promoting the values of democracy and respect for human rights in the Arab world.

Keywords: Arab spring, Social media, revolutions, protesters.



Introduction:

In 2011, protests spread in the Arab world first through Tunisia and then through Egypt and Libya. Arab people in those countries took the streets to protest and replace their government regimes, which was called the Arab Spring revolution (Jazeera). This is important to consider so the reader of this paper can see the relation between social media and the Arab Spring. The observer for the sequence of events and the means that the Arab people have instigated in their revolutions notes that social media played a fundamental and efficient role in the Arab Spring revolutions. It turned from being social media and building relationships and friendships, exchanging jokes to sites exploited by their visitors and activists for political activity for change the reality of their political and economic life and improving their living conditions. This paper shows how Internet activists and users of Facebook and Twitter have played a leading role in the success of revolutions and the overthrow of the ruling regimes in their countries. Therefore, channels, newspapers and world news websites attributed news to Facebook pages and accounts of Twitter and transmitted videos that Internet activists could monitor them on their phones. The purpose of this paper is to explain the incidents that are believed to ignite the Arab Spring and then argue for the role of Social Media in Arab Spring. It will be argued that social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube played a significant role in the Arab Spring.



The Beginning of the Arab Spring Revolution:

The Arab Spring started in Tunisia with an incident when a twenty-six-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi was selling vegetables and fruits on the streets. On December 17, 2010, an officer stopped him from selling and confiscated the produce because he was working without a license. Mohamed poured flammable liquid over his body and set himself on fire. Someone captured this on a smart phone and posted the video of the incident on Twitter, and then the video went viral. This was the flame of the revolution in Tunisia, and its people became to blame the government for unemployment, poverty, and the corruption of the regime. The revolution spread everywhere in the country. Then the President of Tunisia Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country after 23 years of his rule.

In Egypt, on January 25, 2011, the revolution started because of the deterioration of living conditions. After Egypt's leader Anwar Sadat was assassinated in 1981, President Mubarak came into power. Mubarak has used the Emergency Law since Sadat's assassination to enforce Egyptians in any case. The Emergency Law of Mubarak allows "police to arrest people without charge, detain prisoners indefinitely, limit freedom of expression and assembly, and maintain a special security court" (Gorman and McLean 203). The Emergency Law was abused against Egyptians and peaceful demonstrations. In 2010, Egyptians were angry because of the ongoing issues of safety, deflating economy, poverty, and high unemployment rates. On January 25, 2011, Egyptians took the streets in main cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. The Egyptian revolution started after 38 days of the Tunisian revolution. The revolution began not because of



social media, but social media gave it vitality, activity, and rapid spread. Viral videos, such as Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide in Tunisia and Asmaa Mahfouz's activist blog in Egypt created sympathy between their friends and relatives. Then the circle of the movement got larger, spreading to the whole country because of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (Serajul I. Bhuiyan). In Egypt, young people created groups on Facebook to motivate Egyptians out on the streets to eradicate corruption, change constitutional reform, and create new job opportunities. The revolution made the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak leave after 30 years of his rule.

There was a strong relationship between Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi and the Egyptian youth and the revolution in one hand, and social media on the other hand. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played a significant role in uniting people against their corrupt regimes. A tweet in Tunisia about the young man who burned himself up could gather people to rally end corruption. Also, young Egyptians could gather people through Facebook groups such as "We are all Khalid Saeed" and "Network Rasad" to change the rule of Mubarak. Social media and mainstream media coverage have made a significant pressure on the governments and encouraged influential allies such as the European Union and the USA to help Egyptians and Tunisians to change the role of Ben Ali and Mubarak.

Social media made the change faster and created a public space to express opinions. Social media like Facebook and Twitter made the communication easiest between friends, families, and colleagues which may have created an efficient community because of social media. It broke borders among countries to make better connections. For example, people around



the world knew what happened in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in 2011 through social media immediately; however, “in Libya ... the early 1990s there was an uprising in the Green Mountain region in the east of the country. Almost the same set of things that happened in Libya in the early days of the 2011 revolution happened then. People protested, Gadaffi sent in helicopters and bombed them. But nobody knew about it” (Lord Guy Black and Albany Advisory Board). That means social media was a key factor of the change in the Arab Spring and spread the protests everywhere through the Arab region.

Traditional media such as TV coverage of the protests also contributed to the development of the Arab Spring. One example of that was the Aljazeera channel, which was covering the events of the Arab Spring 24/7. Aljazeera has used social media with their broadcast to capture the voices of protesters, Egyptians, and Tunisians and presented their voice to the world. Many researchers, such as Lord Guy Black and Albany Advisory Board, have written about social media and the traditional media in the Arab Spring, but most researchers, such as Summer Harlow, have written about how social media affected and succeeded in conveying the public’s voice and eradicating the ruling regimes more than traditional media.

The Role of Social Media in the Revolution:

Arguably, social media played a significant role in the Arab Spring by making it easy to spread messages, videos, and photos through protesters and then to the entire public. It empowered protests to be together as a group against their governments. Social media was



advanced with the “rapid technological change (made possible by digitization and manifest in ‘convergence’) [that] produced a second wave of new media that may have the potential to change quite radically the relationship between ‘audiences’ or ‘consumers’ and media” (Gorman and McLean 230). “Our evidence suggests that 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,” said Philip Howard, the project lead and an associate professor of communication at the University of Washington. “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” (O'Donnell). With social media, people can reach each other easily and share information efficiently.

The Internet spread fast during the past decades to cover most countries and contributed to the development of social media significantly. The Internet has tied communities together inside and outside their states and made communication available anytime, and any place that has the Internet access. Therefore, protesters in the Arab Spring were communicating via social media within Tunisia and Egypt and abroad with their friends, relatives, and journalists. For example, some protesters have relations with others in Europe and the rest of Arab countries, and they provide them the news of revolution. Some researchers even called the Arab Spring the revolution of Facebook and Twitter. In their article Brown, Guskin, and Michell state “In covering what some deemed the Facebook or Twitter revolutions, the media focused heavily on young protesters mobilizing in the streets in political opposition, smartphones in hand.” The



researchers emphasized three main factors contributed effectively in Arab Spring: "the internet, mobile phones, and social media". Existing Internet made the communication easiest between users in the world.

The statistics of social media's users suggest that the Egyptian and Tunisian protesters have used social media for making the revolution more active and widespread. The majority of citizens have gotten information from social media. On Facebook, Philip Howard (2011) quoted an activist in Cairo saying, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world." A survey from the Dubai School of Government in 2011 found that "Facebook users were of the opinion that Facebook had been used primarily to raise awareness within their countries [in Egypt and Tunisia] about the ongoing civil movements (31% in both Tunisia and Egypt), spread information to the world about the movements (33% and 24% in Tunisia and Egypt respectively), and organize activists and actions (22% and 30% in Tunisia and Egypt respectively)." Moreover, the number of Facebook users in the Arab world increased by 30% in the first quarter of 2011, which was 14,791,972 users in April 2010. Then after the revolution had started in Egypt and Tunisia it became 27,711,503 Facebook users. In April 2001, the number of Facebook users in Egypt was 6,586,260 from a population of nearly 81.500,000 and in Tunisia was 2,356,520 from a population of nearly 10,000,000 (Arab Social Media Report). One of the most famous examples of using a Facebook page was in the Egyptian revolution when Khaled Said was killed in Egypt after he posted a video of police officers dealing poorly with the protesters. The photos of the dead were on Facebook, and people began



sharing the pictures. After that, a man named Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page entitled “We Are All Khaled Said.” The members of this page were more than 500,000. And then they became united to face the regime. The members or the protesters continued to take pictures and videos and used social media as a tool to share with others to make the event alive and active. On this page, they were discussing the political revolution of freedom of speech, socio-economic change, and the most important revolution for democracy.

On the other hand, the protests in the two countries have used Twitter effectively to present their anger and encourage the rest of the citizens joining them. The protesters used hashtag which is “symbolized by the brand #, indexing keywords or topics on Twitter which allows people to follow the topics that they are interested in easily” (Twitter). That made people create some hashtags to unite the users under them. One of the most popular was #Jan25, which was the day that the revolution started in Egypt, and the rate of tweets jumped from 2,300 a day before the revolution to 230,000 a day after. Also, the top 23 videos that the protesters posted received close to 5.5 million views (O'Donnell). The number of tweets and viewers were increased rapidly which reflects the extent of street interaction with social media. Moreover, social media broke borders between countries and opened a window toward the world to know what happens.

However, not everyone agrees with the Twitter and Facebook revolution. A New York writer Malcolm Gladwell says that social media actually had limited impact on the Arab Spring, and the revolution would have happened regardless of social media. He says, “I mean, in cases



where there are no tools of communication, people still get together. So I don't see that as being... in looking at history, I don't see the absence of efficient tools of communication as being a limiting factor on the ability of people to socially organize" (Ingram). It is clear that the revolution would have happened anyway and revolutions indeed have happened in the past before the Internet. However, the Internet and social media have made the revolution more powerful and widespread, which means people around the world knew everything during the revolution, and this informational explosion would not have happened without the Internet and social media. Arguably, it has changed how the protests were made. For instance, it made protests safer and more efficient and mobilized people faster given the width of the landscape of the city.

On the other hand, the governments in Tunisia and Egypt have blocked the Internet and banned websites to control the protests. They saw the Internet and social media as a political threat. As a tweet from twitterglobalpr states, "We can confirm that Twitter was blocked in Egypt around 8 am [January 25th]. It is impacting both Twitter.com and applications. We believe that the open exchange of info and views benefits societies and helps [governments] better connect [with] their people". However, when protesters could not log in to the Internet and were isolated, most of them have gone to the streets to follow the rest of the demonstrators. Also, they were watching Aljazeera channel which had a powerful impact on the Arab Spring. Aljazeera helped people in those countries and converted their voice to the world. At the same time,



Aljazeera has depended on social media such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to reach people in Egypt and Tunisia and the different continents.

In spite of that fact that the Tunisian and Egyptian governments banned the Internet, the protesters found different ways to contact with others inside and outside of their countries which were in Egypt, about 34 percent of the Tweets on the topic of the revolution were coming from people who live outside Egypt (www.pITPI.org). In the study on the role of social media during the Arab Spring, the researchers stated that “In Egypt, a small group of tech-savvy students and civil society leaders stayed connected by organizing satellite phones and dialup connections to Israel and Europe.” Also, an Egyptian protester named Habib Haddad could find a way to spread the message to the world. He announced via Google and Twitter that he needed at least 1,000 translators who translated Arabic tweets into English, French, and German. By this way, he was able to convey and inform people around the world about what was happening in Egypt. As well outside [Tunisia], “the hacker communities of Anonymous and Telecomix helped cripple government operations with their operation Tunisia denial-of-service attacks, and by building software activists used to get around state firewalls” (www.pITPI.org). Also, when the government banned the Internet to block the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the group could continue their political activity from their London location. Ultimately, and they could overthrow Mubarak’s regime.

When the Egyptian government banned the Internet, protesters went more and more on the streets, and 20 % of them were young adults. According to indexmundi.com, 20 % of the



Egyptians were between the ages of 15-24 which represented the majority of those who protested on the street (www.indexmundi.com). After that, the government started to arrest protesters on the streets and some of the famous bloggers who could affect the street such as Ghonim who had a group on his Facebook page reached to 300,000 people. “Many activist Egyptian bloggers, some affiliated with groups such as Kefaya and the April 6 Movement, were arrested and faced physical abuse” (www.pITPI.org). The government knew the power of bloggers through social media who could play an important role in the regime change. In one study by Ahmed Ibrahim, an instructor at the Faculty of Mass Communication at Faros University in Alexandria found that on the January 25 revolution, the university students relied on the Internet for 90 percent of the information while only 10 percent for television. The study revealed that students relied on Facebook about 45 percent, followed by YouTube with 25 percent, news sites at 21 percent, Twitter, forums and blogs at 5.8, 1.9 and 1.7 percent respectively in the end (Agam). That means the Internet and social media were more powerful than traditional media in connecting Egyptian young adults.

On the other hand, channels, magazines, and journalists were relying on social media to convey their message and get information from the protesters. Social media forced CNN, for instance, to change its headline from “CHAOS IN EGYPT” to “UPRISING IN EGYPT” (Boyd, 2012). Because the governments of Egypt and Tunisia were controlled by the news, journalists, and their governmental channels, they had a low level of press freedom according to Reporters Without Borders Organization (RSF). In spite of that traditional media still, plays and affect in



the world because not everyone can access the Internet or use social media regularly. In a study by Summer Harlow from the University of Texas show that Al Jazeera English and The New York Times were the dominant narratives for social media and helped young Egyptians continue their revolution after banning the Internet. She stated, “Using these narratives [Al Jazeera English and The New York Times], the protesters on Facebook and those quoted in traditional media helped mobilize more protesters by telling the story of a regional revolution of the youth that started with social media.” Social media and traditional media were complementing each other to carry the messages throughout the world.

Nevertheless, traditional media relied heavily on digital media or social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. TV stations had accounts on social media for spreading their messages and connecting with people who mostly have mobiles or can access the Internet. Traditional media’s owners recognized that and had changed their policies to adopt with the power of social media. Therefore, a report from Al Jazeera channel says, “YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have become the new weapons of mass mobilization; geeks have taken on dictators; bloggers are dissidents, and social networks have become rallying forces for social justice.” (Aljazeera). Thus, protesters relied on social media and share videos, photos, texts with themselves, friends, and people around the world. Therefore, traditional media benefited from them and used their information to make news and broadcast it, but the challenge that they faced was how to verify whether the information being reported on social media was correct or not.

Discussion:



Various studies (O' Donnell; Michell), showed the impact and the power of social media in conveying the events in news quickly and efficiently. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt may still have happened regardless of social media, but social media increased the speed of their spread and turned every protester who could access the Internet and had social media accounts into journalists. By relying on the Internet and social media, the Tunisians and Egyptians could convey the events of the revolutions and could change their regimes. In spite of the article of a New York writer, Malcolm Gladwell, who challenged the importance of the impact of social media, most researchers ensure that social media played a significant role in the revolutions and changing the regimes of Egypt and Tunisia. Therefore, some influential people and leaders use many accounts to build new opinions, behaviors, and orientations. They want to impact the public's opinion and change it to their interest. For example, some influential people create hashtags on Twitter to gain people's sympathy or distract people to peripheral things instead of important issues. For instance, while I am writing this paper, the president of Syria Bashar Alasad was shown by social media walking alone in some street in Syria, which means there are not problems in Syria and people live safely. This is against the reports of the United Nations that says Syria is in a war and it includes many terrorists. Consequently, most countries are banning travel to Syria such as the United States, Britain, and Saudi Arabia (US, UK, and Saudi Arabia foreign ministries). The point is that leaders know the power of social media to change the public's opinion. Social media became like a mirror that reflects what happens inside a country.



We have seen many examples of the role of social media in the Arab Spring, and how personal issues have become common issues and revolution led to a regime change. Someone may ask how social media is impacting Syria. It could not help Syrian protesters overthrow the government of Syria as Mubarak and Ben Ali in Egypt and Tunisia. As I have mentioned, the revolutions in the Arab Spring did not happen because of social media, but social media made it more powerful and efficient. The emerging technology of social media was a tool that the more tech-savvy public could use against the traditional government. But social media is no longer an unknown territory for the governments since 2010. Also, the situation in Syria is different from Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt and Tunisia, the main factor was the citizens, but in Syria, many countries and groups operate inside Syria such as Russia, Iran, and ISIS (Islamic State) (Jazeera). Russia and Iran are fighting beside Alasad against Syrians. Therefore, social media could not face Russia, Iran, and Syrian regime weapons, and I recommend researchers study and analyze the role of social media in Syria. Syria is worth studying in the future, because the revolution has not been completed yet, and it is difficult to analyze the impact of social media on it because Syria is not safe to conduct studies and surveys within its territory. Also, the political reality within it is very complicated because of the presence of several international and regional forces that may affect the results of the study.

Conclusion:

This paper discussed how traditional media relied on social media and how social media has affected and succeeded in conveying the public's voice and eradicating the ruling regimes. It



is clear that social media has played a significant role in the Arab Spring. Tunisians and Egyptians have used social media to organize and manage their revolution. They used hashtags on Twitter to unite protesters and Facebook pages to make groups and motivate citizens to take the streets. Therefore, Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes banned the Internet and cut the connection between protesters. However, the protesters took the streets in growing numbers, and they found ways and alternative networks to stay in contact. With social media, protesters were united as a group against their corrupt regimes and forced Mubarak and Ben Ali to leave their roles. Therefore, in the future, social media at the political level may contribute to promoting the values of democracy and respect for human rights in the Arab world. We have seen clearly the role of social media during the Arab Spring and how it turned to sites exploited by their visitors and activists for political activity for change their political and economic life.



Works Cited

Agam, Mohamed. "Twitter and Facebook.. Leader of the Revolutions the Arab Spring." *Middle East*. 26 Dec. 2011. Web. 27 May 2017.

Boyd, E.B. "How Social Media Accelerated the Uprising in Egypt." *Fast Company*. Fast Company, 30 July 2012. Web. 26 May 2017.

Brown, Heather, Emily Guskin, and Amy Mitchell "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*. Pew Research Center Journalism & Media, 27 Nov. 2012. Web. 22 May 2017.

"Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter". *Arab Social Media Report*. Vol. 1, no. 2, 2011 <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf>. Accessed 17 June 2017.

Gorman, Lyn, and David McLean. "Media and Society Into the 21st Century." *Wiley*. 2009. Web. 22 May 2017.

Harlow, Summer. "It Was a "Facebook Revolution": Exploring the Meme-Like Spread of Narratives during the Egyptian Protests." ["Fue una "Revolución de Facebook": Explorando la narrativa de los meme difundidos durante las protestas egipcias"]. *Revista De Comunicación*, vol. 12, Dec. 2013, pp. 59-82.



Ingram, Mathew. "Malcolm Gladwell: Social Media Still Not a Big Deal." *Gigaom*. 29 Mar. 2011. Web. 22 May 2017.

Jazeera, Al. "Russia, Syria and Iran Warn US against Further Strikes." *Al Jazeera*. 14 Apr. 2017. Web. 15 June 2017.

O'Donnell, Catherine. "New Study Quantifies Use of Social Media in Arab Spring." *UW Today*. University of Washington, 12 Sept. 2011. Web. 21 May 2017.

The World Factbook. "The World Factbook: EGYPT." (2011, March 23). *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency, 15 June 2017. Web. 19 June 2017.