Explaining the Role and the Impact of the Social Media in the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The paper examines how the efforts of ordinary people in the Arab “street” to move away with compliance and toleration from authoritarian regimes, also allowed them, once the opportunity arose, to invest in and use social media to change politics “from below”. This is not to argue that the social media were “responsible” for the uprisings. The uprisings were made by the people of the Arab countries, but the social media acted as a powerful accelerant facilitating the events in ways that were crucial. In particular, and with emphasis on Egypt, we examine: (a) the socioeconomic dynamics and human insecurity of the region and (b) the role of the social media prior and during the uprisings in empowering “social non-movements” and “leaderless networks”, and igniting public mobilization, enabling civic engagement and journalism, as well as collaboration between activists at regional and global level.

Key words

Social media, activism, Arab Spring, social movements

Introduction

Prior to the ‘Arab spring’, many media analysts welcomed the introduction and spread of social media in the Arab world. In so doing, they stressed that the social media would allow the people of the region not only to have access to alternative and independent news information, but also to gradually increase the pressure for democratization and liberal reforms (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003; Lynch, 2006). None of the analysts, however, went so far as to argue that the social media would play a significant and protagonist role in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. The technology of social media and blogging, it was felt, was unlikely to ‘induce wide political change in the Middle East’ (Lynch, 2007). The Mubarak regime, wrote Faris in 2008:

[…] is not going to fall because college students wearing funny glasses and sipping lattes start a Facebook groups […] There will be and can be no revolution without revolutionaries […] The amplifying, coordinating, cooperative possibilities of these technologies should not be loaded with unrealistic expectations about their potential to magically usher a revolution […]

By the beginning of 2011, however, the social media acted as an ‘accelerating agent’ (Chebib and Sohail, 2011), that helped protesters hold online discussions and organize and stage popular uprisings which, in turn, led to the resignation of two unpopular leaders, as well as their rapid spread across Arab countries, and transnationalization to the wider world.

The skepticism with which the impact of social media was viewed prior to the events of 2011 was due to a ‘top-down’ perspective that most analysts adopted while trying to explain the authoritarianism of Arab regimes. The analysis concentrated on the strength of coercive institutions as a major factor underlying the stability of the Arab regimes. This analysis did not sufficiently investigate the changing political and social dynamics of the Arab world and, therefore, failed to appreciate the importance the social media could have in political communication and mobilization (Gause, 2011). Bearing that in mind, this paper will adopt the ‘bottom-up’ perspective for understanding the events in the Arab region, and in particular Egypt. To do so, the paper will try to examine how the efforts of ordinary people in the Arab ‘street’ to move away from compliance with and toleration of authoritarian regimes, also allowed them, once the opportunity arose, to use and invest on the social media in order to change politics from below. This is not to argue that the social media were ‘responsible’ for the uprisings.

However, neither were they ‘irrelevant’ (Maiwaring, 2011), given their nature which allows for connections to be made in a very fast and widely distributed manner; through their power of real-time networked communication, the social media acted as a powerful accelerant, facilitating the events in ways that were crucial. The chronicle of the uprisings in the Arab world, we argue, presents two protagonists that led to the final act of revolt: civil society and social media.
Political and Socioeconomic Dynamics

‘Social Non-Movements’ and Change

The popular uprisings in Arab world took many western analysts and Arab elites by surprise – a surprise that was justified, given the conspicuous silence of the Arab media towards the suppression of political dissent, human rights abuses and earlier emergent protests (Hafez, 2008), as well as the failure of Western observers (journalists, analysts and academics) to understand the growing political disenchantment and despair of the Arab peoples. By over examining the factors that explain the stability of authoritarian regimes (i.e. limited electoral campaigns, market reforms, diplomatic relations with major Western countries) (Clad, 2011), Western observers and Arab elites failed to appreciate how the dissent of diverse constituencies who possess few institutional channels to express their discontent, may find ways to express their demands through novel means of political mobilization and communication.

As Kaldor (2011) rightly argues, governments and analysts perceived civil society as a solely Western privilege and phenomenon in general, while the Arab region was attached to ‘Islamic Exceptionalism’. But the demonstrations and uprisings of 2011, with Muslims and Christians standing together (Bayat, 2011a, 2011b), proved that civil society not only exists in the region, but it is also a significant actor, with no cultural limitations and monopolies on human values. This was the main reason why the ‘Arab Spring’ took the West by surprise, since everyone was studying the behavior of governments rather than societies in the region. Following the traditional ‘top-down’ approach, which rests on the assumption that traditional organized political parties, movements and sociopolitical elites are the only significant agents of change, they did not examine the lives of the working poor and other subordinated groups and how these groups and individuals could operate as forces of social and political change in the Arab world.

A very useful analysis in this direction was provided in 2009 by Asef Bayat in his book “Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East”. In theorizing social change in societal contexts that are often viewed as being stagnant, Bayat stressed that many observers did not comprehend the fluidity of people, movements, cultures, and social structures in the Arab world. Through the prism of prevailing social movement theories formulated largely by Western social scientists, analysts mistakenly concluded that youth, activist and/or women movements may not exist in the Arab world, as movements need to be hierarchically organized, with recognized leaders and resources, promoting a sustained claim on the authorities and holding a repertoire of performances such as street marches, public meetings, associations, and media statements.

Such a ‘framework’, however, as Bayat points out, relied, specifically, on Euro-American patterns of historical development and sociopolitical contentions, and could not explain the social and political complexities and particularities of the Arab world. Thus, observers were not alert to what Bayat describes as ‘social non-movements’, defined as ‘collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations’ (Bayat, 2009, p. 14).

They develop by means of the ‘art of presence’, which is the ‘courage and creativity to assert collective will in spite of all odds, to circumvent constraints, utilizing what is available and discovering new spaces within which to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized’ (Bayat, 2009, p. 26). For Bayat, however, these ‘non-movements’ are also the product of the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary people’, the ‘non-collective but prolonged direct actions of dispersed individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of their lives (land for shelter, urban collective consumption or urban services, informal work, business opportunities, and public space) in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion’ (Bayat, 2009, p.45).

Bayat provides broad illustrations of this reality. For example, the urban poor running their own parking services, Muslim women wearing the veil, or hijab, based on their individual preferences, youth throwing parties behind closed doors and expressing themselves by balancing God, sex, and fun, and Muslims and Christians experiencing everyday cosmopolitan coexistence in an Egyptian suburb. Social and political dissent in the Arab world, therefore, although unspoken, was, and is, action-oriented. Interests and demands were and are made directly, during everyday life, and not through leaders and groups that are organized and ideologically driven. Thus, under conditions of constraint, and through mundane practices in their day-to-day lives, regular people of the Arab world were and are able to move away from their toleration and acceptance of authoritarian regimes, producing sociopolitical changes to their communities, cities, governments, religions, and selves. The result is a
Moreover, about 20.3% cent of the Arab population is living below population growth rates, indicating that Arab countries will need about 51 million new jobs by 2020. Youth unemployment rates range from about 2% in Qatar and Kuwait to about 22% in Mauritania, youth unemployment is a serious challenge common to many Arab countries. These trends in unemployment, coupled with volatile growth, high unemployment and persisting poverty (AHDR, 2009, p.4).

The Arab region, also, faces growing challenges to the security of its population from pressures such as water shortages and desertification. Total available surface water resources in the Arab countries are estimated at 277 billion cubic meters per year, only 43 per cent of which originates within the Arab countries. Surface water resources shared with neighboring countries outside the region account for approximately 57 per cent of its total water requirements. Moreover, the desert has swallowed up more than two-thirds of the total land area of the region (9.76 million square kilometers of desert, or 68.4 per cent of the total land area). Ongoing desertification threatens about 2.87 million square kilometers or a fifth of the total area of the Arab countries (AHDR, 2009, p.5). And if this is not enough, according to UN estimates, the Arab countries will be home to some 395 million people by 2015 (compared to about 317 million in 2007, and 150 million in 1980). In a region where water and arable land are shrinking, population growth at these rates creates intense pressures under conditions of volatile growth, high unemployment and persisting poverty (AHDR, 2009, p.4).

Oil-led growth has created weak structural foundations in Arab economies. Many Arab countries are turning into increasingly import-oriented and service-based economies. The types of services found in most Arab countries fall at the low end of the value-adding chain, contribute little to local knowledge development and lock countries into inferior positions in global markets. This trend has grown at the expense of Arab agriculture, manufacturing and industrial production. Overall, the Arab countries were less industrialized in 2007 than in 1970 (AHDR, 2009, pp.11-12).

Unemployment is also a major source of economic insecurity in most Arab countries. Data shows that the overall average unemployment rate for the Arab countries is about 14.4% of the labor force compared to 6.3% for the world at large. While national unemployment rates vary considerably, ranging from about 2% in Qatar and Kuwait to about 22% in Mauritania, youth unemployment is a serious challenge common to many Arab countries. These trends in unemployment, coupled with population growth rates, indicate that Arab countries will need about 51 million new jobs by 2020. Moreover, about 20.3% cent of the Arab population is living below the two-dollars-a-day international
poverty line. This estimate is based on seven Arab middle and low income groups, whose population represents about 63 per cent of the total population of the Arab countries not in conflict. Using this estimate, about 34.6 million Arabs are living in extreme poverty, ranging from a low 28.6 – 30% in Lebanon and Syria to a high 41% in Egypt and 59.5% in Yemen (AHDR, 2009, pp.13-14). All these are happening against the background of:

- Increasing urbanization: in 1970, 38 per cent of the Arab population was urban. By 2005, this had grown to 55 per cent, and it is likely to surpass 60 per cent by 2020 (AHDR, 2009, p.5). This accelerating drift to cities and towns is straining already-overstretched infrastructure and creating overcrowded, unhealthy and insecure living conditions in many Arab centers. Underpaid employees of the civic sector survive by taking second or third jobs in the informal sector. Currently, between one third and one half of the urban work forces are involved in the unregulated, unorganized informal sector (Bayat, 2011a). In Egypt, to take an example, 61% of all employment is informal. Moreover, 75% of new entrants into the labor market during the first half of this decade were entering into informal work (Denis, 2008).

- Demographic pressures: young people are the fastest growing segment of Arab countries’ populations. Some 60 per cent of the population is under 25 years old, making this one of the most youthful regions in the world, with a median age of 22 years compared to a global average of 28 (AHDR, 2009, p.5). To make things worse, the majority of these young girls and boys constitute ‘the ‘middle-class poor’ with high education, self-constructed status, wider worldviews, and global dreams who nonetheless are compelled, by unemployment and poverty, to subsist on the margins as casual, low-paid, low-status, and low-skilled workers (as street vendors, sales persons, boss boys, or taxi drivers), and to reside in the overcrowded slums and squatter settlements of the Arab cities’ (Bayat, 2011b). Lacking institutional channels to make their claims, streets and new forms of media and communication technology become the arena for the expression of discontent. To understand that, however, it is also important to examine how the internet and social media, in particular, operated as powerful tools for mobilization and assertion, paving the road for the uprisings of 2011.

Social Media and Activism Prior to the Uprisings

One of the more novel mobilization and communication outlets for local and global activists has been Web 2.0, which describes a plethora of social media available on the internet, including blogs, photo and file sharing systems, and social networking sites. Although these media are largely designed for personal presentation, political speech and action also emerge, such as in postings protesting government actions on YouTube, or in utilization of still image and video functionalities on mobile phones during demonstrations and police confrontations (Aday and Livingston, 2008; Vasi, 2006; Carty and Onyett, 2006; Clark and Themudo, 2006). This is the case because Web 2.0 is a highly scalable, accessible and cheap technology, which enables individuals not only to communicate with groups of other individuals, but also to influence groups of other individuals as they share ideas, activities, events and interests within their networks (Blossom, 2007, pp.30-56).

Bearing that in mind, the social media created unprecedented opportunities for the exchange of information outside the control of the dominant and supervised mainstream media of the Arab regimes. Information on the internet, not available in the mainstream media, and coming from alternative sources that otherwise were not heard, enhanced the resources available to actors in social and political struggles. This became all the more important in the authoritarian Arab regimes, where access to the internet and the emerging concept of blogs, as well as various forms of online social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, ‘meant that a new arena became available in which the public could express views, ideas, and criticism; comment on everyday issues, discuss cultural, social, religious, and, indeed, political topics’ (Khamis, 2011, p.1161).

In fact, and according to research conducted by the Arab Social Media Report (Shalem and Mourtada, 2011a), by the end of 2010 the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world stood at 21,361,83 million, up from 11,978,300 in January 2010 (a 78% annual growth rate). Egypt, with around 4.7 million Facebook users, constituted, by the end of 2010, 22% of total users in the Arab region, followed by Saudi Arabia (15%, 3,213,420), Morocco (11%, 2,446,300), United Arab Emirates (10%, 2,135,960), Tunisia (8%, 1,820,880) and Algeria (7%, 1,413,280). In addition, by the end of 2010, the Arab region also had 40,000 active blogs (Ghannam, 2011, p. 5). And all this in a region where youth between the ages of 15 and 29 not only make up around one third of the population, but also 75% of Facebook users.
The social media, however, are implicated in ways far beyond merely reducing the costs of communication, or transcending the barriers associated with traditional media. As Fenton (2008) would argue, the large, decentralized and often, leaderless networks facilitated by the new communication technologies operated a form of politics that is based on the participation and direct engagement of all citizens rather than the hierarchical model of institutionalized bureaucratic authoritarian politics. They were, and still are, about building relationships and forging solidarity rather than simply providing information. This became all the more important in the societies of the Arab world, where leaderless ‘social non-movements’, as mentioned above, operated and operate as mechanisms that make a virtue and philosophy out of their disorganized character in order to reject authoritarianism and drive change from below. The blogosphere and the social media served and serve as an important ‘free space’ (Radsch, 2011) to express deep-seated discontent with the political status quo.

In fact, a study on the Arab blogosphere found that at the beginning of 2009, criticism of domestic leaders topped the list of political topics discussed (Etling et al., 2009). In addition, the innovative uses by bloggers of the new digital media to organize protests and publicize state-sponsored abuses, also revealed that a ‘significant youth contingent was becoming politicized and increasingly adroit at using blogs and social media to challenge the status quo’ (Radsch, 2011, p. 73). The following examples are indicative:

1. Bahrain Online, which started in 1999 with lively debates on domestic politics and discrimination against the Shia, who comprise the majority in the island nation of almost 800,000. By 2010, the blog attracted more than 100,000 daily hits and had thousand of members, despite being officially blocked by the authorities (Ghannam, 2011, p. 9).
2. The ‘Freedom of Expression in Mourning’ campaign, an online protest against Ben Ali that was launched when Tunisia hosted the World Summit on the Information Society in 2005. The protest won international coverage, with calls for “enough of the dictator’s reign” (Radsch, 2011, p.75).
3. The ‘April 6 movement’ (see below), and the ‘We are all Khalid Said’ Facebook group (see below) in Egypt, which used cell phones, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to document police excesses and brutality, organize meetings and protests, alert one another to police movements, and get legal help for those who had been arrested (Khanis and Vaughn, 2011, p. 9).

Such actions escaped the confinement of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and seized the space of information and deliberation provided by the internet and the social media. They served as alternative sources of information and proposals that originated outside authoritarian official discourse, not only enabling cyber-activism and civic engagement through mobilization and organization of protests, but also providing a platform for ordinary citizens to express themselves and document their own versions of reality. Most significantly, the internet, with its networked, interactive and polycentric form, also accommodated radically different types of political actors from different places at different times, to engage with common interests.

An excellent example in this direction is provided with the 2008 labor strikes in Egypt and their link to the actions of cyber-activists. In 2008, hundreds of worker strikes took place in Egypt and two young activists created a Facebook page, the ‘April 6 Facebook Strike’, calling for a general strike with the workers in the Nile Delta city Mahalla. The page attracted 70,000 participants within two weeks, at a time when only about half-a-million Egyptians were even on the social network. Several bloggers also covered the strike in Mahalla, which turned violent when government thugs fired on protesters. Bloggers posted pictures of crowds tearing down posters of Mubarak and stepping on them, which spread through the blogosphere. One such post on Manalaa.net drew more than 40,000 views (Radsch, 2011, p. 73; Faris, 2008). The cornerstones of these actions can be found back in 2004, when the social coalition Kefaya was formed. Leaving its political endeavor aside, the Egyptian blogosphere emerged from this movement, as the means of communication between young people who were frustrated with the imposed restrictions, freedom limitations and governance of the regime. Kefaya inspired cyber-activism in Egypt and established a strong anti-presidential sentiment in the web, which resulted in the 2007 state ‘War on Bloggers’. The Government imposed limitations on media freedom and a ‘pull-back’ in freedom of expression, accompanied even by detainment and imprisonment of bloggers accused for online activism (Radsch, 2011, p.76).

Through such diffuse and horizontal actions, opponents of authoritarian regimes, felt that their views where widely shared and that enough of their fellow citizens where willing to join them (Khanis and Vaughn, 2011, p. 5). The internet and the social media, one could argue, had the practical benefit of spreading information, and of making people feel part of something. It gave them a sense of
solidarity and for some, the ‘permission’ to go further (Beckett, 2011). This contributed to the establishment and maintenance of ‘latent’ ties that could be activated very quickly and used according to each situation and necessity.

Indicative is the ‘We are all Khalid Said’ Facebook page, established by Wael Ghonim, a 31-year-old Google marketing executive in June 2010. Like many others, he was introduced into the informal network of young organizers by the movement that came together around Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel Prize-winning diplomat who returned to Egypt in 2009 to coordinate the country’s moribund political opposition. Ghonim had little experience in politics but an intense dislike for the abusive Egyptian police, the mainstay of the government’s power. The result was a Facebook group Ghonim set up, following a young Egyptian beaten to death by the police. Ghonim, unknown to the public, but working closely with the ‘April 6’ Youth Movement, said that he used Said’s killing to educate Egyptians about democracy movements. He filled the site with video clips and newspaper articles about police violence. He repeatedly hammered home a simple message: ‘This is your country; a government official is your employee who gets his salary from your tax money, and you have your rights.’ He took special aim at the distortions of the official media, because when the people ‘distrust the media then you know you are not going to lose them,’ he said. He eventually attracted hundreds of thousands of users, building their allegiance through exercises in online democratic participation. When organizers planned a ‘day of silence’ in the Cairo streets, for example, he polled users on what color shirts they should all wear, black or white (Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 2011). By the end of 2010, the page had more than 500,000 fans, providing, one might argue, a means for ordinary people to connect with human rights advocates, while also trying to amass support against police abuse, torture and the way in which the Mubarak government permanent emergency laws allowed people to be jailed without charges (Preston, 2011).

It is clear therefore, that prior to the uprisings of 2011, the social media, along with online bloggers, had played their part in communicating, coordinating and channeling the rising tide of change from below. With the majority of the population of the Arab world under the age of 30 and many technology-savvy, and adept at using new forms of communication to bypass state controls and mobilize around common issues or grievances, a powerful means of coordinating and communicating mass protests was in their hands. Bearing that in mind, the following section examines how the social media during the Egyptian uprising empowered a ‘leaderless network’, ignited public mobilization, and enabled civic engagement and journalism, as well as collaboration between activists at regional and global level.

Social media and the uprising in Egypt

Egypt’s revolution, which began with the ‘Day of Anger’ (25 January 2011), was inspired by the protests against and the overthrow of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011. With the images of Mohammed Bouaziz setting fire to himself in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, a desperate act of defiance, posted on YouTube and Facebook, protesters in Egypt started organizing in small groups of three to four people, went door to door passing out flyers that told people to attend the protests, put up Facebook pages and posted on Twitter. Many spoke out against the regime in YouTube videos. Others exhausted their thumbs sending text messages to everyone in their mobile phone books. They even dialed random numbers in the hopes that the exhortations to demonstrate would fall on sympathetic ears (Baker, 2011). In addition, the Facebook page of Khaled Said (see above) not only became a focal point for the dissemination of popular protest throughout Egypt, but also scaled vertically through key Facebook sites overcoming the relatively limited penetration of social media (Mainwaring, 2011).

With a penetration rate of 5.5%, but a large population which translated into around 6 million Facebook users, a core number of activists were able to connect to a much larger number of social contacts who could be influenced by information from those with Facebook accounts (Shalem and Mourtada, 2011b, p. 5). The result was the ‘March of the Millions’ (1 February), which forced President Hosni Mubarak’s departure.

The protesters also took advantage of the functional multiplicity of online media in order to establish a credible mobilization network, communicating and channeling the rising opposition. Facebook pages, such as the ‘We are all Khaled Said’, were not only used as a means to provide information and advice to the protesters, a form of ‘on-line press management tool’, but also contributed in raising awareness of civil society on the demands and action taken by the activists. Twitter was used as a mobilization tool, with activists communicating their images and information via this network. Images were also posted showing satellite maps marked with arrows indicating where protesters could go to avoid pro-government thugs. Google maps and gathering points were posted to
potential protesters, guiding them and exalting their morale by also posting successful activities from other places and enhancing the feeling of coordinated action. The utilization of mobile phones offered a private communication conduit that couldn’t be detected from state agencies, and mobile cameras captured images and videos to be communicated through other networks (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011, pp. 11-12).

Such communication and coordination not only expanded the ranks of Egyptians in Tahrir Square from young, well-educated students to doctors, lawyers, judges, Christians, Muslims and women, but also helped to counteract the censorship and blackout attempts by President Mubarak to control local and foreign information and support for the protestors (Joyce, 2011). During the Internet blackout, Google and Twitter scrambled to offer the ‘Speak-2-Tweet’, a service whereby users could call an international telephone number to post and hear Twitter messages without the internet.

The ‘Small World News’ project “Alive” partnered with ‘Speak-2-Tweet’ to translate voice messages from protestors at Tahrir Square, and one of their reports was that of a 15-year-old boy telling his story about being ‘abducted from the street, beaten, and detained for 22 days’. Some recordings appeared on the ‘Speak-2-Tweet’ Twitter account from Egyptians who learned about the service during the blackout, possibly via phone calls with friends and family outside of Egypt (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011, p. 15).

Many NGOs from Egypt as well as from abroad, collaborated with the activists in order to provide infrastructure and training for the optimum tactics, methods and usage of the medium. European social movements advised them how to use “ghost servers” in order to confuse the online monitoring of the government (Reissmann and Rosenbach, 2011). ‘Global Voices’ from Tunisia and the ‘Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights’ contributed to the creation of a digital guide, citing how to use mobile phones and Twitter to share information about arrested activists. Tunisian activists on Facebook posted “Advice to the youth of Egypt: Put vinegar or onion under your scarf for tear gas” and brainstormed with their Egyptian counterparts on how to evade state surveillance, resist rubber bullets, and construct barricades. Non-governmental organizations from the United States trained a number of activists, focusing especially on video recording devices, and the Kenyan NGO ‘Ushahidi’ built their online capabilities for reporting securely with mobile phones and building online content around it (Ishani, 2011).

Not surprisingly, during the period between January and April 2011, approximately 2 million new Facebook users were registered only in Egypt (29% growth rate), while approximately 95% of the population was getting its information about the events through social media sources- as opposed to 85% from local independent and private media and 40% from state controlled media. In addition, Facebook was used primarily to raise awareness about the ongoing uprising (31%), spread information to the world about it (24%), organize activists and actions (30%), with those using it for solely entertainment or social reasons accounting for less than 15%. The majority (almost 60%) of Facebook users, also felt that the main impact of Mubarak blocking the Internet was positive for the uprising, spurring people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organizing (Salem and Mourtada, 2011b, pp. 6-9) Accordingly, in the ‘Tweets’ generated during the same period, the hash-tag [#egypt] was the most popular with 1.4 million mentions, while on 10th February alone, when President Mubarak left office, almost 35,000 “Tweets” were generated in Egypt (Salem and Mourtada, 2011b, pp. 16-20).

Such mobilization also contributed to the ‘compounding effect’ (Mainwaring, 2011) of the social media, connecting people from Egypt to the entire Arab world, enhancing their common legitimate struggle for democracy and change. In fact, the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world rose to 27,711,503 (April 5, 2011), up from 21,377,282 (January 5, 2011), having almost doubled since the same time last year (14,791,972, in April 2010). At the beginning of April 2011, the country average for Facebook user penetration in the Arab region was over 7.5%, up from just under 6% at the end of 2010. The number of Facebook users in the Arab world increased by 30% in the first quarter of 2011. In addition, the estimated number of active Twitter users in the Arab region at the end of March 2011 was 6,567,280. The estimated number of tweets generated in the Arab region in the first quarter of 2011 (Jan. 1 – March 30) by these “active users” was 22,750,000 tweets. The estimated number of daily tweets was 252,000 tweets per day, or 175 tweets a minute, or roughly three tweets a second. The most popular trending hash tags across the Arab region in the first quarter were #egypt (see above), #jan25 (with 1.2. million mentions), #libya (with 990,000 mentions), #bahrain (640,000 mentions), and protest (620,000) (Salem and Mourtada, 2011b, pp.9&16).

Last, but not least, the social media played a pivotal role in scaling connections between people, in achieving density, disseminating courage, awareness and sympathy, and in countering misinformation
generated by the oppressive Egyptian regime in many countries around the world (Mainwaring, 2011). Activists and protesters managed to distribute at a global level the images of brutality and state violence, by utilizing the combined performance and interaction between mainstream and social media. This was crucial. Traditional media, such as Al Jazeera and CCNIs, distributed worldwide images and news received from the activists. The activists, who acted as a ‘watchdog’ of the state controlled national media (Cottle, 2011a, p.652), used Twitter as a main broadcaster (Twitter being the platform journalists visit in order to follow a story) and pointed them to the right place to find video footage. To do so, they relied on a network of activists from within and without Egypt, activists who knew how to download video and how to use Google maps. Tunisian blogger and ‘Global Voices’ Advocacy Director, Sami Ben Gharbia, who operates the website Nawaat, an independent blog collective that gives voice to Tunisian dissent, said that much of the content from the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings that appeared in traditional media was collected from Facebook for translation and posted to open-access sites and Twitter for journalists and others (Ghannam 2011, p. 16).

‘Our revolution’, stated Wael Ghomin, the creator of the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page, ‘is like, Wikipedia . . . Everyone is contributing content, [but] you don’t know the names of the people contributing the content. This is exactly what happened. Revolution 2.0 in Egypt was exactly the same. Everyone contributing small pieces, bits and pieces. We drew this whole picture of a revolution. And no one is the hero in that picture’ (quoted in Khoury, 2011, p. 80). The bloggers were instrumental in publicizing and spreading accounts of torture and human rights violations by the security services. As protesters came up against state repression and military violence, images and accounts of human rights abuses rapidly circulated through the ‘Global You Tube News Bureau’ (Cottle, 2011b) to foreign correspondents and the world’s mainstream news services.

Hence, the phenomenon of ‘citizen journalism’ from the streets of Cairo, acting as real time correspondence for global media, gave a significant dimension to these ‘leaderless movement’. Images and videos captured from embedded in the protest ‘citizen journalists’, trained for this purpose as described earlier, were communicated worldwide. It provided the field for collaboration and exchange of ideas between activists in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, while simultaneously being the ‘virtual global public cyber-sphere’ for worldwide web-activists (Khanis and Vaughn, 2011, p. 24). As Cottle (2011a, p. 658) has rightly argued, traditional and new media ‘played an integral and multifaceted part in building and mobilizing support, coordinating and defining the protests within different Arab societies and transnationalizing them across the Middle East, North Africa and to the wider world.’

In Conclusion

When people log into the social media, the thought of creating and starting a revolution is pretty far from their minds. But in the Arab world, the social media has become an important platform for dissent and outlet for political and economic frustration. As noted in the introduction, however, it would be wrong to characterize the uprisings as ‘revolutions’ of the social media. Their ‘leaderless’ character was a genuine bottom-up expression of public will. The political, economic and social oppression of the Arab people, the lack of government transparency and unemployment were the real motivating factors behind demands for reform. People were united under their desire to ensure the fundamental principles of human security, dignity and respect to human rights, their share in a respectful, decent life and prosperity. Nothing could have happened if there were no people willing to be physically present in the streets, ready to put their own life at risk, in order to fulfill their demands and achieve their goals (Khoury, 2011, p.85).

The growth and use of social media in the Arab region, however, did play a critical role in mobilization and change. For it was the social media, not formal institutions or political parties, that provided the effective tool for activating the public, for allowing the loose networks of activists and protesters to mobilize, communicate and collaborate. They provided an alternate space for reviving a dormant public consciousness into a sentient, dynamic social discourse. In addition, and as noted above, the use of social media did not suddenly appear during the uprisings. The uprisings were just the ‘boiling point’ reached after several years of increasing dissent and efforts to change from below (Morsi, 2011), both virtual (through the mushrooming of the blogosphere and digital activism) and real (through ‘social non-movements’).

The social media, one may argue, have not only alleviated the obstacles to the dissemination of information and collective action, but have also created a shared meaning among citizens and networks of activists in the region. As the continuing protests in Egypt indicate against the slow pace of reforms in Egypt, social media are not only capable of constructing calls for actions that allow for a large number of people to join, but also create a serious threat to the legitimacy of political regimes. They
enabled people in Tahrir Square and elsewhere to talk, discuss and act freely. In so doing they not only contributed to the empowerment of civil society in the Arab world, but also to the consolidation of a critical mass of active social media users in the region.

Although it is still very early to make an assessment of the role these social media users might have in the democratic reforms of their countries, one should not ignore the region’s young population and increasing penetration rates. Youth (between the ages of 15 and 29) make up around 75% of Facebook users in the Arab region. At the beginning of April 2011, eight Arab countries had acquired more Facebook users (as a percentage of population) than the US, one of the highest-ranking countries in the world in terms of Facebook penetration (Salem and Mourtada, 2011b, p. 10). Given this, one cannot but assume that the social media will continue to play a growing role in political, societal and economic developments in the Arab region. With new players and means of communication, it may usher some far reaching changes in the region's politics.


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**References**


