



Volume 5, Number 19

October 10, 2011

Social Media and Other Revolutions

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The unfolding of the Arab Spring protests sheds light on the significant role of social media in the Middle East's contemporary political arena. The emergence of Social Media has been a groundbreaking development that has made a crucial contribution to regime transformation in some cases, and on some of the post-revolutionary countries' political culture. Still, it must be understood that Social Media is not the reason behind the Arab Spring uprisings; rather, it is a powerful tool for the organization of protests. The root causes of the uprisings are the social, economic and political issues in each country, along with global problems such as the rising prices of essential products. In addition, it should be noted that the weight and patterns of the Social Media phenomenon differ from one country to another.

In recent years, Social Media platforms such as blogs and especially social network sites (SNS) have become ubiquitous: in April 2011, Twitter had 175 million subscribers worldwide and, in August 2011, Facebook had 750 million subscribers. The rising popularity of these SNS in the Middle East was part of this trend. The number of Facebook users in Egypt increased dramatically, with 4.5 million Facebook users in August 2010, 5.2 million in January-

February 2011, 6.6 million in March, and 7.3 million in August. This increase was, in part, a response to the central, symbolic role of Social Media in the "Tahrir Square Revolution" that toppled Hosni Mubarak from power.

In August 2011, the numbers of Facebook users were also significant in Tunisia – 2,602,640 (24 percent of the total population); Bahrain – 287,020 (23.6 percent); Saudi Arabia – 4,034,740 (15 percent); Lebanon -1,201,820 (29 percent); and elsewhere as well. On the other hand, Libya and Yemen, for example, the percentages of Facebook penetration were far smaller (0.8 percent and 1.4 percent). However, the fact that very few Libyans and Yemenis use Facebook does not necessarily imply that Social Media had no effect on these countries. There, as well as in Syria and Iran, where Facebook and Twitter use was also low, sites like YouTube enabled protestors to disseminate videos of peaceful popular protests and violent government crackdowns to the world.

From a historical perspective, the important role of Social Media in the Arab Spring is reminiscent of the crucial roles played by other media forms in helping to stimulate and sustain earlier socio-political revolutions, e.g. print media during the Protestant Reformation; cassette tapes at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran; and the assistance of television, in the tearing down of the Berlin Wall a decade later.

Currently, and as shown during the overthrow of both the Egyptian and Tunisian presidents, SNS can serve as a foundation for coalitions which cut across social and political lines and which are built around a unifying goal – e.g. ousting the regime – even if the members are not unified on any other issue. Further, the individual SNS user, sitting alone at home or in an internet café, can see the multitudes who share his views. The notion that so many others share the same goals empowers the individual to take action, e.g. to participate in street protests. This internalization process, occurring in millions of users, can be the final push that releases masses of protestors to the streets.

SNS enabled protest leaders — often only a handful of people — to surprise the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes with demonstrations that were organized on short notice. For example, Wael Ghoneim, who in June 2010 created the extraordinarily successful Facebook page “We are all Khalid Sa’id,” in protest against the brutal killing of a young Egyptian by the security forces, played a dominant part in organizing the mass demonstrations in Egypt that ultimately caused Mubarak’s ousting in February 2011. One particularly important factor in Social Media’s success is that it is difficult to identify the sources of protest in advance. This is why some of the uprisings, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, took the regimes, as well as external observers, by surprise. This was demonstrated anew in Egypt last month, when a mob attacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo, following a short-notice call on Twitter.

In addition, Social Media has helped to break the monopoly on information traditionally held by Middle East governments by virtue of their control over traditional media outlets. Because it requires no expensive broadcast equipment, Social Media can be accessible to everyone. Therefore, the populace has had the opportunity to bypass the regime’s monopoly and present inspiring stories of protest, as part of their alternative narratives to the official one.

Furthermore, Social Media can help to coordinate tremendous numbers of people. Unlike the unidirectional messages created by traditional media outlets, Social Media allows for bilateral communications. This makes it possible for protest organizers to quickly receive feedback directly from the field, which enables them to continue their protests in the face of regime repression. At the moment, this may well be occurring in Syria.

Finally, Social Media possesses decentralized communications: messages can easily be disseminated from multiple locations. This gives the system redundancy, which allows it to continue working even if a large number of its human or technological actors cease to function. For example, Wael Ghonim’s aforementioned Facebook page continued to function after he was arrested for 10 days on January 27, 2011. Moreover, that page was only one of many sites

involved in organizing demonstrations, reporting the events, and maintaining a protest discourse that reached people around the world. Even if some of these had been blocked, it would have been impossible to staunch the flow of information from the multitude of other sources. Only a total blocking of the Internet could overcome this redundancy. Indeed, Egypt took this measure on January 28, 2011, and blocked access to 90 percent of websites. However, such a move could not last long without serious economic and political consequences, and was quickly rescinded.

The rise of Social Media in the Middle East represents a major new development in the patterns of political challenges to entrenched regimes, as well as in the political cultures of post-revolutionary states in the Middle East. In the past, the takeover of government radio and television stations was an indispensable first step for any coup-makers. Social Media has rendered this unnecessary. Another new pattern was the lack of clear leaders. Indeed, a few activists, such as Wael Ghoneim, have become symbols around whom protesters have rallied. However, they have staunchly refused to claim any leadership for the sake of maintaining socio-political heterogeneity and the popular nature of the protest. In post-revolutionary situations, this lack of leadership may become problematic, as it remains unclear who will eventually fill the political vacuums that have been created. Even if new leaders are chosen democratically, there is no guarantee that they will be satisfactory to all the groups in the coalition that removed the previous regime. In other words, the coalition's ability to continue as a single interest group is highly problematic in the long term. Nonetheless, it does seem that whatever government might be established will have been made cognizant of the continuing power of Social Media, and made aware of the latent threat of renewed action if the "public desire" is overlooked.

It is too early to determine whether the recent spate of upheavals which have toppled entrenched rulers will give rise to pluralist societies underpinned by the rule of law, but the new rules of the game present a significant change in the political culture of post-revolutionary countries. This is not necessarily good news regarding their ability to govern, as shown by the attack on the

Israeli embassy in Cairo. The Egyptian authorities' hesitant reaction to the events exposed their reluctance to act firmly against an angry mob. SNS are certainly not the sole explanation for the Egyptian authorities' weakened ability to maintain order. Still, Social Media has played an important role in that regard, as it has shown that it can successfully challenge the centralized power of the state. Post-revolution governments of the Middle East will be grappling with this new state of affairs for the foreseeable future.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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