

The Role of Social Media in Political Mobilisation: a Case Study of the January 2011 Egyptian Uprising

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Abstract

In light of the Arab Spring revolutions of early 2011, the Internet and its tools of social media have been heralded as instrumental in facilitating the uprisings. This dissertation will look closely at the extent to which Egyptian activists used social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and weblogs as tools for organizing and generating awareness of political mobilisation, in the uprisings that took place in Egypt in January and February 2011. This dissertation will use established theories of communication that were developed long before the advent of social media, to place its use within a wider context of communication, and to explain how the inherent characteristics of social networking that made it appealing to the activists in Egypt. The discussion will focus on the uprisings in Egypt, which have been widely publicized and followed by the international community, and aim to demonstrate that while possessing enormous potential to facilitate and expedite political mobilisation, the Internet is an inherently dialectical force that should not be treated solely as a liberator or oppressor.

Introduction

*"We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world."*¹

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,"² or as the oft-quoted Egyptian Google executive Wael Ghonim famously said, "If you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet."³ 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 "on one side are government thugs firing bullets...[and] on the other side are young protesters firing 'tweets'."⁴ 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

¹Anonymous Cairo activist, quoted in Nadine Kassem Chebib & Rabia Minatullah Sohail, "The Reasons Social Media Contributed to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *International Journal of Business Research and Management* 3 (2011): 139.

² Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 37.

³ Albrecht Hofheinz, "Nextopia? Beyond Revolution 2.0" *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1417.

⁴ Nicholas D. Kristof, "Tear Down This Cyberwall!" *The New York Times*, 17 June, 2009. Accessed 30 October, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/opinion/18kristof.html>.

authoritarian rulers by monopolizing on the “digital gap.”⁵ 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 Qaddafi, 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, Facebook, 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

⁵ Allagui, Ilhem. “Multiple Mirrors of the Arab Digital Gap.” *Global Media Journal*: 14 (2009)

Tunisia and Egypt respectively).⁶ Equally noteworthy, in Egypt there are now more users of Facebook than there are subscribers to newspapers.⁷ In addition to Twitter, Facebook, 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.

It goes without saying that this is not the first time a technological innovation has been used as a tool for change. The advent of Gutenberg's printing press in the 15th century played a crucial role in weakening the power of the medieval church and led to the Renaissance, and later the Reformation and Scientific Revolution. However, it is only centuries later that we are able to fully comprehend the impact of such a revolutionary and transformational invention. Attempting to do the same with social media whilst contemporary with its inception narrows the spectrum of understanding that comes with the retrospect of time. Crucially, as is true of both the printing press and the Internet, any new invention with transformative and disruptive potential must be viewed as dialectical in nature. "Roughly during the first century after Gutenberg's invention, print did as much to perpetuate blatant errors as it did to spread enlightened truth."⁸ It is with this historical observation in mind that any individual attempting to analyse the role of the Internet and social

⁶ See Appendix B for illustration

⁷ Jeffrey Ghannam, "Social Media in the Arab World," Center for International Media Assistance, 3 February 2011, 12.

⁸ Renato Rosaldo, "The Cultural Impact of the Printed Word, A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23:1981, 508.

media in society must do so with full acknowledgement of its dialectical nature and, most importantly, with full acknowledgement of contemporary subjectivity. As Richard N. Haas points out, “the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and cassettes all posed challenges to the existing order of their day. And like these earlier technologies, social media are not decisive: they can be repressed by governments well as employed by government to motivate their supporters.”⁹ It is in light of these circumstances that this discussion of the role of social media in the ongoing Egyptian revolution will be addressed through a dialectical framework of analysis, which “requires that we analyse both continuities and discontinuities with the past, specifying what is a continuation of past histories and what is new and original in the present moment,”¹⁰ allowing for a critical perspective that acknowledges both history and novelty.

As Malcolm Gladwell, a prominent critic of cyber-Utopianism has pointed out, revolutions have been taking place for centuries before Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook. However, there is empirical evidence that, “the first three months of 2011 saw what can only be termed a substantial shift in the Arab world’s usage of social media towards online social and civil mobilization.”¹¹ The advent of social media did not cause the revolutions of the 2011, but played a crucial facilitating role, by “gathering real time information, by facilitating the weak ties, that is, the physically distant and socially diverse relationship across the globe.”¹² This

⁹ Richard N. Haas, “Reflections on the Revolutions in Egypt,” *The New Arab Revolt*, (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 2011)

¹⁰ Douglas Kellner, “Theorizing Globalization,” *Sociological Theory* 20: 2002, 300.

¹¹ Chebib & Sohail 2011, 151.

¹² Ibid.

dissertation aims to analyze the extent to which social media can play a positive role in political mobilisation, by analysing a cross-section of primary and secondary sources, that have documented the events in Egypt both during the time of the uprising, and in the period since.

As Evgeny Morozov points out,

“the challenge of anyone analyzing how the Internet may affect the overall effectiveness of political activism, is first, to determine the kind of qualities and activities that are essential to the success of the democratic struggle in a particular country or context and second, to understand how a particular medium of campaigning or facilitating collective action affects those qualities and activities.”¹³

Therefore, this dissertation will aim to demonstrate how the characteristics of social networking can be harnessed to further the goals of collective political actions, while also bearing in mind the significance of cultural and historical context. By examining both primary and secondary sources, it will highlight the inherently dialectical nature of the Internet, aiming to avoid a technologically deterministic perspective that characterizes the Internet as a force strictly for either liberation or oppression. Rather, the dissertation argues that though there were underlying socio-economic issues and historical factors that played a crucial role in fuelling the revolutions of early 2011, they cannot be fully understood or appreciated without reference to the unprecedented role of social networking in both facilitating the actual events of the uprisings and bringing them to international attention at an unparalleled degree, literally in “real time.” Though it is undeniably correct in saying that revolutions will occur regardless of the existence of the Internet or technology,

¹³ Morozov 2011, 198

the connection between technology and society is central to this discussion; “technology *is* society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools.”¹⁴

This discussion will deal specifically with how those who participated in the 2011 Egyptian uprisings used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and personal online blogs as a form of online activism, as these are the most readily accessible forms of social media available. Chapter 2 will provide definitions of these tools of social media. This chapter will then provide historical context for the advent of social media within the Middle East. Finally, as this dissertation aims to analyse the link between social media and political mobilisation through the creation of a network society, it is imperative to fully explore established theories of communication. Chapter 3 will specifically address the role of social media in the uprisings in Egypt, which have up to the time of writing, led to a regime change. The events in Egypt are particularly relevant to this debate, for, “if we learned political leadership and coalition building from the Russian Revolution and popular initiative from the French Revolution, the Arab revolutions in...Egypt demonstrated the power of networks.”¹⁵ First, the events of the actual revolutions will be summarized, in order to analyse whether social media played a purely positive role in the uprisings, and whether it has continued to shape the subsequent regime change up to the present day. Finally, Chapter 4 will then place the use of social media in the Egyptian example within a wider context of the role of the Internet as a democratic medium,

¹⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1996), 5.

¹⁵ Ilhem Allagui and Johanne Kuebler. “The Arab Spring and the Role of ICTs,” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1435.

to further analyse the democratising potential of the Internet. The discussion will end with a look at the situation in Egypt post-revolution, and evaluate if social media will continue to play a role in Egyptian politics.

Chapter 2: Social Media and Theories of Communication

“Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture.”¹⁶

A.) Introduction

It is now widely acknowledged in both the international media and academic circles that social media tools did play a role in the Egyptian uprising of 2011, though there is a range of opinion concerning how effective it was in aiding political mobilisation. This chapter will begin by providing definitions of the social media tools that were used in the uprising, and will supply data on the demographics of Egyptians using these tools in order to provide context and place their use within an evolutionary context of media technology in the Arab region. Secondly, a chronological summary of the 18-day uprising will be outlined. Finally, this chapter will serve as a literature review of the scholarly research that has been conducted thus far on the role of social media in the Egyptian uprising.

¹⁶ Castells 1996, 500

B.) Social Media Definitions

Information Communication Technology (ICTs) is defined by Manuel Castells as “the converging set of technologies in microelectronics, computing (machines and software), telecommunications/broadcasting, and optoelectronics.”¹⁷ For the purpose of this discussion, social media networks (SMNs), a subset of ICTs, will be defined as “online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online and participation and collaboration.”¹⁸ Additionally, social media tools are websites that “interact with the users, while giving them information.” It is this two-way nature of SMNs that is central to this argument, and the role they played in the Egyptian uprisings.¹⁹ The following section will further define the four most widely and effectively used SMNs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogging.

i. Facebook

Launched in 2004 as a social networking website exclusively for Harvard students, Facebook now has roughly 800 millions active users, as of November, 2011.²⁰ Facebook users interact with other users, or “Facebook friends” by updating their “status”, writing on other members “walls” or sending direct personal messages. Users are able to “create and join interest groups, ‘like’ pages, import and search for contacts, and upload photos and videos. The average user is connected to

¹⁷ Ibid., 30

¹⁸ Alex Newson, Deryck Houghton and Justin Patten, eds, *Blogging and Other Social Media: Exploiting the Technology and Protecting the Enterprise*, (England: Gower Publishing Limited, 2008), 3.

¹⁹ Chebib & Sohail 2011, 140

²⁰ “Facebook Statistics,” Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, Accessed 10 November, 2011.

80 community pages, groups and events. Over 75% of users are located outside the United States, despite its American origins. It is significant to note that more than 350 million Facebook users access their accounts via their mobile phones, a crucial aspect to the role social media was used during the Arab Spring.²¹ Facebook penetration in the Arab world stands at 27,711,504, according the *Arab Social Media Report*, as of April 2011.²² In Egypt alone, there are 6,586,260 active Facebook users, the highest number of users of any Arab state.²³ Between 5 January and 5 April, almost 2 million Egyptians joined Facebook, the highest growth in users in the Arab region.²⁴ The largest percentage of Egyptian Facebook users are between the ages of 18 and 24 years old (41%).²⁵

ii. Twitter

Twitter, launched in 2006, is a “real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting.”²⁶ Users communicate via “Tweets” which are short posts limited to 140 characters, also allowing for embedded media links. Twitter users can “follow” or essentially subscribe to the updates of other users, some of which include conventional media sources, such as

²¹ Ibid.

²² Dubai School of Government, “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter.” *Arab Social Media Report 1* (2011) Accessed 25 October, 2011. www.arabsocialmediareport.com, 9.

²³ Ibid., 27

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Egypt Facebook Statistics,” Socialbakers, <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/egypt>. Accessed 11 November, 2011.

²⁶ “About Twitter,” Twitter, <http://twitter.com/about>, Accessed 10 November, 2011.

Newsweek or *Al-Jazeera*, celebrities, and friends. Additionally, tweets can be categorized using “hashtags” which “group posts together by topic or type.”²⁷ For illustration, refer to Appendix D. For example, the most popular hashtags in the Arab region between January and March 2011 were #egypt (1.4 million mentions), #jan25 (1.2 million mentions), and #libya (990,000 mentions).²⁸ There are an estimated 131,204 Twitter users in Egypt between 1 January and 30 March 2011, generating an average of 24,000 tweets a day during that time period.²⁹ One user in Cairo generated 60,000 words alone during the 18-day revolution, a total of 1,500 tweets.³⁰ The Arab Social Media Report tracked the volume of daily tweets in Egypt throughout the time period of 1 January through 28 February, with the peaks in Twitter use revolving around major events in the uprising, including the protests in Tunisia on 14 January and Hosni Mubarak stepping down on 11 February.³¹

iii. YouTube

YouTube was the first website dedicated solely to uploading and sharing personal video. Over 3 billion videos are viewed each day on YouTube, reaching 700 billion playbacks in 2010.³² As well as uploading and viewing media, users can also leave comments on videos. YouTube is the third most frequented website online.³³

²⁷ Chebib & Sohail 2011, 141

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Arab Social Media Report 2011, 28

³⁰ Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, ed. *Tweets from Tahrir*, (New York: OR Books, 2011): 1

³¹ Arab Social Media Report 2011, 20

³² “YouTube Statistics,” Youtube, http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics, accessed 10 November 2011.

³³ “Top Sites,” <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>, accessed 10 November, 2011.

iv. Weblogs

The final tool of social media this paper will address is weblogs. Briefly defined, weblogs, more commonly referred to as blogs, are “an easy-to-use content management tool. When you ‘blog’ you are instantly adding new content to your site via a web interface. No technical or programming skills are necessary.”³⁴ Blogging requires merely Internet access and typing skills, and these low-cost barriers have led to personal blogs proliferating worldwide. There were 35,000 active blogs in the Arab region in 2009, growing to 40,000 by 2010.³⁵ This number has increased dramatically since the 2011 uprisings, speculated at 600,000 blogs today, according to the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.³⁶

C.) Social Media in the Arab world

The significance of social media tools cannot be appreciated without being placed within the context of media culture in the Arab world. Over the last ten years, the Arab region has experienced the highest rates of technology adoption amongst all developing nations.³⁷ According to Bernard Lewis, “Perhaps the single most important development is the adoption of modern communications. The printing press and the newspaper, the telegraph, the radio, and the television have

³⁴ David C. Wyld, “The Blogging Revolution: Government in the Age of Web 2.0” *The IBM Center for The Business of Government*, 2007, 49.

³⁵ The Initiative for an Open Arab Internet, “Arabic Blogs: An Embodiment of Freedom of Expression,” <http://www.openarab.net/en/node/335>, accessed 10 November, 2011.

³⁶ Arabic Network for Human Rights Information Online, <http://www.anhri.net/en/>, accessed 10 November, 2011.

³⁷ P.N. Howard *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19-20.

all transformed the Middle East.”³⁸ Though Internet penetration has increased dramatically over the last several years, with 40-45 million Internet users identified in 16 Arab countries surveyed in 2009, the technological capabilities of modern life that are taken for granted in highly developed societies, have progressed in a relatively short span of time and have not been embraced by the authoritarian governments that dominate the Middle East.³⁹ “Print and visual media developed within decades of each other in the Arab world, as opposed to developing through centuries in Western Europe,” so it is of little surprise that “ruling elites fear the Internet as a conduit for political and moral subversion, and this fear has dominated the discourse on the use of the technology.”⁴⁰ Before 1990, media ownership fell mostly in the hands of the government, subject to strict censorship and supervision. This was largely a result of the 1952 revolution which “claimed a monopoly on truth and hence had to have a monopoly over the means of propagating it as well.”⁴¹ The 1996 launching of Al-Jazeera, the scion of independent media broadcasting in the Middle East represents a pivotal moment in the history of Arab media, a “revolution in Arabic-language television” and establishing itself as “a forum for debate on human rights, fundamentalism, religion and corruption, offending just about every

³⁸ Bernard Lewis, “Freedom and Justice in the Modern Middle East,” *The New Arab Revolt*, (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 2011).

³⁹ Jawad Abbassi, CEO Arab Advisors Group, “An Overview of the Arab Telecom and Broadband Markets and Broadcast Media Industry” Georgetown University for Contemporary Arab Studies Symposium, “Information Evolution in the Arab World,” 22 March, 2010, accessed 10 November, 2011.

⁴⁰ Andrew Hammond, *Popular Culture in the Arab World* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 118.

⁴¹ Ami Ayalon, “Journalists and the Press: the Vicissitudes of Licensed Pluralism” in *Egypt from Monarchy to Republic* (Boulder: Westview Press Inc, 1995), 271.

Arab state in the process.”⁴² As Internet access has proliferated across the Arab region, a “highly ambivalent and complex relationship between media and governments” has developed, in which Arab autocracies have encouraged Internet penetration in the name of economic development, while simultaneously attempting to maintain control over the spread of information and media sources.⁴³ This complex relationship between increasing Internet accessibility and a complementary increase in suppression of online freedom has led to a culture of subversion, an “emerging cyberworld that knows no physical boundaries,”⁴⁴ based on online social networking. With a lack of truly independent and representative media, disenfranchised youths have searched for an alternative method of participation in the public and political spheres.

D.) Theories of communication

The use of social media as an effective vehicle for organisation and mobilisation can be explained by several established theories of communication, which are provided in the following section. Though Lasswell’s functionalist theory of the media and Granovetter’s theory of weak ties are both based on sociology rather than International Relations, and were developed before the advent of social media, these theories can be adequately used to explain why the Egyptian activists in this example chose social media as their form of communication.

⁴² Hammond 2007, 15

⁴³ Dr. Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, “Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution,” *Arab Media and Society* 13: 2011, 3.

⁴⁴ C.T. Salmon, L. Fernandez, and L.A. Post, “Mobilizing public will across borders: roles and functions of communication processes and technologies.” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25: 2010, 159.

Harold Lasswell's functionalist sociology of the media provides an analytical framework for the study of communication. Born in the wake of leaps in communication techniques post-World War I, Lasswell's formula is based on the multi-faceted question "who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?" This framework favours a content analysis approach, a research technique that "aimed to achieve an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications."⁴⁵ Content analysis is utilized in the following chapter to analyse how the Egyptian activists behind the Revolution used social media tools.

Manuel Castells's network theory can be effectively used to explain how the characteristics of social networks can be valuable for political activism, through the creation of weak ties, the anonymity provided by the Internet, and the egalitarian nature of online communication. "Weak ties are useful in providing information and opening up opportunities at a low cost. The advantage of the Net is that it allows the forging of weak ties with strangers, in an egalitarian pattern of interaction where social characteristics are less influential in framing, or even blocking communication."⁴⁶ The strength of a tie is based on a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie."⁴⁷ Social media networks are based on these weak ties- acquaintances with other people whom one might share common

⁴⁵ Armand Mattelart and Michele Mattelart, *Theories of Communication: A Short Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 28.

⁴⁶ Castells 1996, 388

⁴⁷ Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78: 1973, 1361.

interests or goals with, or may have mutual friends. The strength in weak ties lies in their ability to introduce us to new ideas and new information, and the Internet allows these ties to be forged with incredible speed over vast geographical barriers.⁴⁸

In his seminal 1973 study entitled “The Strength of Weak Ties,” sociologist Mark Granovetter analysed the link between micro-level interactions and macro-level patterns in social networks, concluding with the strength of weak ties lies in their potential for “diffusion, social mobility, political organization, and social cohesion in general,” across different networks.⁴⁹ The advantages of weak ties over strong ties lie in their ability to diffuse information and ideas across social groups. Granovetter illustrates this theory by using the example of spreading a rumour. If an individual shares a rumour with all of his closest friends (considered strong ties) and those individuals pass the rumour to their close friends, some individuals are likely to hear the rumour multiple times, as “those linked with strong ties tend to share friends.”⁵⁰ Thus, the information is contained in one social group. When applied to political mobilisation, the same rule applies. If the activists organizing the protests in Tahrir Square had only spoken to their closest friends or family members, it is unlikely that hundreds of thousands of Egyptians would have shown up on 25 January. By capitalizing on the weak ties forged online through social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, the activists were able to not only circulate their calls for political mobilisation, but began a dialogue that fostered the attitude

⁴⁸ Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change,” *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2011.

⁴⁹ Granovetter 1973, 1361

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1366

for political activism in Egyptian communities. A final conclusion of Granovetter's study that is germane to the Egyptian example is that "weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within particular groups."⁵¹ Weak ties established online allowed different oppositional factions to connect over a common goal of ousting Mubarak, and to translate this into political mobilisation.

Chapter 3: The role of social media in the 2011 Egyptian uprisings

"A young Internet executive called Wael Ghoneim helped organise a call for a demonstration for 25 January in Cairo's Tahrir Square through a Facebook page entitled We Are All Khaled Siad. Fifty thousand people came, not just the dedicated hard core, but fresh faces, old and young. They came back the next day, and the next and the next, swelling to millions, and the rest is history."⁵²

A.) Introduction

i. Background to Revolution

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 mobilisation. To analyse 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

⁵¹ Ibid., 1376

⁵² Johnny West, *Karama!* (London: Heron Books, 2011), 145.

of social and digital media within the buildup to the 2011 uprising to emphasize the multitude of factors that contributed to the eventual outcome of political mobilisation. As Lisa Anderson argues, what is more important than the actual use of technology, is the “hows and whys” that led to the use of technology, in other words, context is key.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ Egypt is plagued with a youth-bulge society, unable to provide jobs and benefits for its disproportionately 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.⁵⁵ 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 mobilise. The launch of the Egyptian Movement for Change, also know as the Kefaya Movement, in 2004, serves as a starting point for the mobilisation 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

⁵³ Lisa Anderson, “Demystifying the Arab Spring,” *The New Arab Revolt*, (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 2011).

⁵⁴ Tarek Masoud, “The Road to (and from) Liberation Square,” *Journal of Democracy* 22: 2011, 21.

⁵⁵ Ragui Assad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, “Youth in the Middle East and North Africa” Report by the Population Reference Bureau, Washington D.C., 2007.

difficult to reach workers.”⁵⁶ This all changed in 2008, when 27-year old human resources coordinator Esraa Abdel Fattah, who has since been dubbed the “Facebook 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 Facebook user population at the time.⁵⁷ 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 privatisation. “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.”⁵⁸ The result was the formation of a new movement: the April 6 Youth Movement, which has since played a key organisational role in the 2011 protests. It wasn’t until two years later in June 2010, when Facebook 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.⁵⁹ In reaction to his murder, Wael Ghonim, the Middle East marketing director for Google,

⁵⁶ Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy, “Protest Movements and Political Change in the Arab World,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Outlook* January 28, 2011. Accessed online at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/OttawayHamzawy_Outlook_Jan11_ProtestMovements.pdf.

⁵⁷ Hofheinz 2011, 1419

⁵⁸ David Faris, “Revolutions Without Revolutionaries? Network Theory, Facebook, and the Egyptian Blogosphere,” *Arab Media and Society* 2008, 2.

⁵⁹ Serajul I. Bhuiyan, “Social Media and Its Effectiveness in the Political Reform Movement in Egypt,” *Middle East Media Educator*, 1: 2011, 17.

set up the Facebook 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 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.”⁶⁰

ii. Timeline of Events

This paper will be addressing the way that social media was used to organise 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

⁶⁰ Kurt Anderson, “The Protester,” *Time* 14 December, 2011, Accessed 15 December, 2011.

http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132_2102373,00.html#ixzz1gbVoLcHw

over Egyptian society throughout Mubarak's presidency."⁶¹ According to Al-Jazeera's coverage of the 18-day uprising, "protest organizers relied heavily on social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter" to organize this initial protest.⁶² On 26 January, protests became heated as security forces used teargas to dispel demonstrators. The Egyptian government blocked Facebook 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.⁶³ By the 28th, Internet access had been blocked almost entirely across the country. "Terrified of the new tools of Twitter and Facebook, 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."⁶⁴ The activists who organized the protests had already predicted this response by the Egyptian government. Despite the Internet blockade, protesters were able to continue organising demonstrations due to the organisational infrastructure that had already been established. "A Facebook event, set up days in advance, received tens of thousands of attendance confirmations and a Google document posted to a Facebook group collected email

⁶¹ Elizabeth Iksander, "Connecting the National and the Virtual: Can Facebook Activism Remain Relevant After Egypt's January 25 Uprising?" *International Journal of Communication* 5: 2011, 1230.

⁶² Timeline: Egypt's Revolution, Al-Jazeera, Accessed 5 December 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/201112515334871490.html>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Idle & Nunns 2011, 59

addresses of the group's members in case of a blockade.”⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

B.) The role of social media in the Egyptian uprising

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 organisational tool, as an alternative press and outlet for citizen journalism, and finally as a tool for generating awareness both regionally and internationally.

⁶⁵ Chebib & Sohail 2011, 145

⁶⁶ Timeline taken from Al-Jazeera

i. Social Media as an organisational tool

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 organisational 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 Facebook 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 Facebook group *We Are All Khaled Said* served as an organisational 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 Facebook provide the organisational infrastructure, but also it provided a crucial platform for potential protesters to network with one another and share their common grievances. The page allowed different activist networks, including the April 6 movement, to communicate with one another.⁶⁷ Once individuals found out that other people

⁶⁷ “We Are All Kaled Saeed Facebook Page,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,

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.”⁶⁸ Once the plans for demonstrations were put in place, word was spread throughout offline communities, as it was essential to reach the majority of the Egyptian population that remains offline. For example, in Cairo, activists planning the demonstrations spread the word via taxi drivers, infamous in Egyptian society for their talkative nature. “Here in Cairo, taxi drivers love to talk to people, so we said to ourselves, how can take advantage of that?” explained activist Waleed Rashid.⁶⁹ 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 rebroadcasted 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.”⁷⁰ The conclusion to be drawn from this example is that successful politically driven social movements must be based on grassroots

<http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/11/%E2%80%9Cwe-are-all-khaled-saeed%E2%80%9D-facebook-page>, accessed 12 December 2011.

⁶⁸ Constance Duncombe, “The Twitter Revolution? Social Media, Representation and Crisis in Iran and Libya,” <http://law.anu.edu.au/coast/events/apsa/papers/151.pdf>, 40.

⁶⁹ “Episode One,” *How Facebook Changed the World: The Arab Spring*, BBC 2, 5 September, 2011, television.

⁷⁰ Johnny West, *Karama!* (London: Heron Books, 2011), 336.

organisation 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.

ii. Social Media as an alternative press

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.”⁷¹ The dialogue taking place via Facebook, 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.”⁷² 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

⁷¹ Khamis & Vaughn 2011

⁷² “Al Jazeera’s Early Start Reporting Revolutions,” <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/-media140---al-jazeera-s-early-start-reporting-revolutions/s2/a543674/>, accessed 12 December, 2011.

ordinary citizens, SMNs create linked activists who can contest the narrative-crafting and information-controlling capabilities of authoritarian regimes.”⁷³

It is of interest to note that there is growing criticism of a “Western narrative” that is shaping the way the world perceives the Egyptian revolution and other uprisings that are considered part of the Arab Spring. George Friedman summarizes this “Western narrative” as the assumption perpetuated by the mainstream media that “the Arab Spring was a political uprising by masses demanding liberal democratic reform and that this uprising, supported by Western democracies, would generate sweeping political change across the Arab world.”⁷⁴ Central to this narrative is the use of social media as a facilitating tool. It has been argued because Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media tools are Western in origin, their use in helping protesters to successfully overthrow their respective dictators has been exaggerated and has fueled the “hegemonic discourse” of a modern, technologically-advanced West aiding the underdeveloped non-West.⁷⁵ However, to discount the use of social media as an attempt by the West to take credit for the successful uprisings is to ignore all those Egyptians who made use of the collaboration between social media networks and the mainstream media, in an effort to give their own narratives a platform.

⁷³ Duncombe 2010, 32

⁷⁴ George Friedman, “Re-Examining the Arab Spring,” http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110815-re-examining-arab-spring?utm_source=freelist-f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20110816&utm_term=gweekly&utm_content=readmore&elq=47671d6e4f514f89ada8fec3656823d5, accessed 1 December, 2011.

⁷⁵ Duncombe 2010

In order to explore the role of social media in spreading information, a case study is provided below on how Twitter was used by Egyptian activists during the time period of 25 January when the first mass demonstration occurred in Tahrir Square, to 11 February when President Mubarak stepped down. Content analysis was performed on a total of 1,091 tweets that were collected by Egyptian activists Alex Nunns and Nadia Idle.⁷⁶ The tweets chosen do not represent a comprehensive sample of Twitter users in Egypt, and focus on those in Cairo as well as some Egyptians outside the country. Equally importantly, the authors only included those who tweeted in English, indicating that the sample is biased towards the more affluent and educated in Egypt.

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. See Figure 1 below for illustration.

⁷⁶ Idle & Nunns 2011

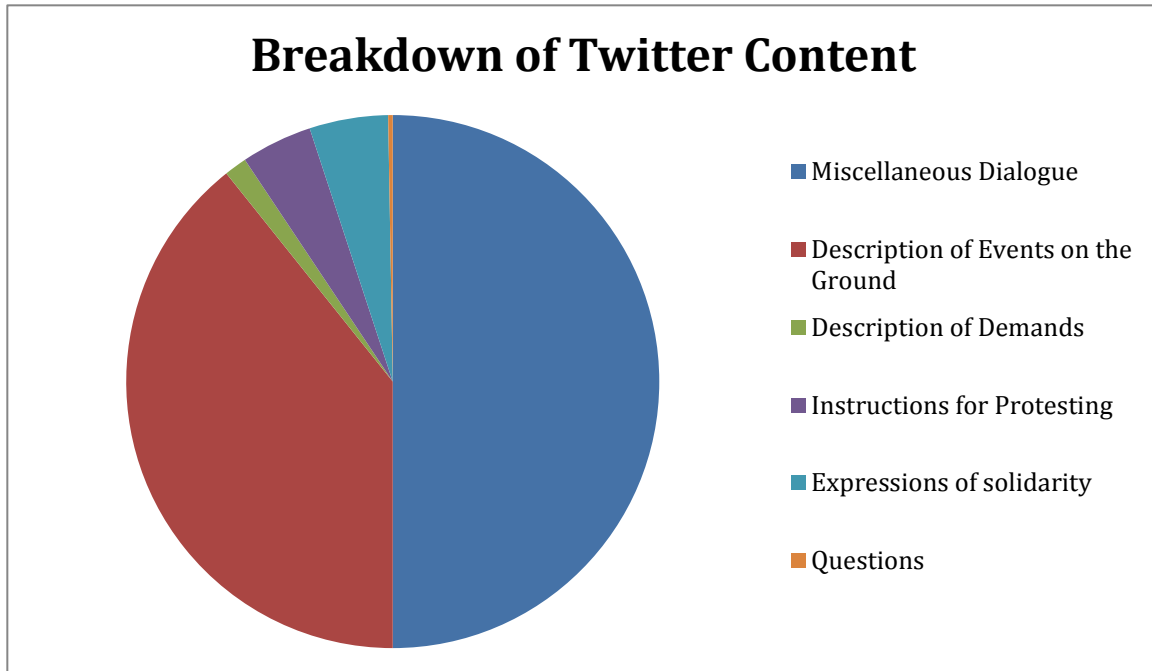


Figure 1

The breakdown of tweets above demonstrates that in this sample, Twitter was used mainly as a platform for discussion of what was going on amongst Twitter users and as a way of providing firsthand accounts of events on the ground. As Twitter is a mobile phone-enabled social media with embedding capabilities, users could tweet updates by the minute and include other forms of media such as photographs and video. For example, on 26 January, Twitter user “Monasosh” tweeted, “Right now in front of my eyes, tear gas, they beat protesters and arrested some.”⁷⁷ On 29 January Gigi Ibrahim tweeted “Egyptian State-owned media is showing nothing from what’s really happening and trying to minimize it...”⁷⁸ Examples such as these aptly demonstrate the ways in which Twitter users acted as an alternative press, self-publishing their own accounts of the uprisings taking place, and thus providing their own narrative of events that were exposed to both a domestic and international

⁷⁷ Idle & Nunns 2011, 49

⁷⁸ Ibid., 68

audience. In this way, social media allows those far away, whether members of a diasporic community living outside Egypt, or members of an international audience, to follow events literally in real-time. When the Egyptian government shut down the Internet, some individuals outside the country took it upon themselves to continue the momentum, using technology to bridge the geographical barriers and continue providing coverage of events. Such was the case with John Scott-Railton, an American graduate student who reached out to Egyptian friends by phone to gather their accounts and observations of the ongoing protests, which he translated into tweets for his 4,000 followers. According to Professor of Digital Media Sree Sreenivasan, “there is a real role for social media for people who are far away from the action to bring context, understanding and analysis.”⁷⁹

It is within this new sphere of citizen journalism that problems of accuracy and anonymity have surfaced. While the anonymity provided by the Internet has allowed for previously unheard individuals to express their dissent without fear of authoritative backlash, there is also the possibility for abuse of this anonymity. Such is the case in the example of the controversial blog, *A Gay Girl in Damascus*. Claiming to be the personal blog of Syrian-American lesbian Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari, the author was eventually revealed to be the creation of a 40-year old American man, Tom MacMaster, a graduate student at the University of Edinburgh.⁸⁰ MacMaster claimed to be blogging under the false identity of a Syrian woman in

⁷⁹ “Meet the man tweeting Egypt’s voices to the world,” *Time*, 1 February, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2045489,00.html>, accessed 14 December, 2011.

⁸⁰ “Gay Girl in Damascus: Tom MacMaster defends host blog,” BBC News Scotland, 13 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-13747761>, accessed 10 November, 2011.

order to lend credibility to his reports of human rights abuse in Syria. The discovery of the hoax was met with outrage from fellow Arab bloggers, who accused MacMaster of undermining their own efforts of citizen journalism.

iii. Social Media as generating awareness

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 Facebook users polled agreed that Facebook was used most effectively to raise awareness of the causes of the movements within the country.⁸¹ (See Appendix A for illustration.) Perhaps the best example of this is the creation of the Facebook group We Are All Khaled Said by Google executive Wael Ghonim. Created to commemorate the brutal murder of the young Egyptian blogger who died at the hands of police, the Facebook group quickly attracted over 500,000 members who spread the graphic photographs of Said's disfigured corpse around the Internet. In this way, Ghonim exploited the networking capabilities of Facebook to engage in an effective cyberactivism campaign against the repressive and corrupt Egyptian state. This paper will use Howard's definition of cyberactivism as "the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline...the goal of such activism is often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artefacts

⁸¹ Arab Social Media Report 2011, 6

that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes.”⁸² Ghonim’s Facebook group did indeed have political outcomes, as it was used as an organisational tool for spreading word about the initial January 25 demonstration. Ghonim’s use of Facebook for political ends sparked a new consciousness in the region of the political implications and networking capabilities of Facebook. Research done by Zach Brisson of consultancy firm The Reboot, has shown that even though Facebook penetration remains relatively low and uneven amongst Egyptians, those who admit to not using it still vouch for its role as a platform for free expression of political will. He points to the new popular culture that has developed around Facebook in Egypt’s cities, “the pulp literature and pop clothing emblazoned with Facebook now common in Cairo,” illuminate the link between the social media network and the revolutionary zeal amongst protestors.⁸³ This could be viewed as part of a wider change in social consciousness amongst those Egyptians who took part in the uprisings. “The online forums enabled the general public to challenge the monopolies of power in the country.”⁸⁴ There was a definite change in attitude towards authorities and it has been argued that this was a collective shift that was propelled by the use of digital media. What Hofheinz refers to as the “copy and paste” trend can in fact have political consequences. “What news they read, what they discuss, what they like, and what they think is authoritative is increasingly informed by what links are forwarded to them by their

⁸² Howard 2010, 145

⁸³ Zach Brisson et al. “Egypt: From Revolutions to Institutions,” New York: Reboot, 2011. Accessed 21 November, 2011. <http://thereboot.org/wp-content/Egypt/Reboot-Egypt-From-Revolutions-To-Institutions.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Chebib & Sohail 2011, 151

friends on Facebook, or by what flies by them on Twitter.”⁸⁵ 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.”⁸⁶ Thus, cyberactivists 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. In an interview with *Time* he explained how before 25 January, he was not particularly politically active, and his dissent did not extend beyond discussions with friends about their dissatisfaction with the Egyptian government. However, an important shift took place once Harara realized via Facebook that this dissatisfaction was manifest in the Egyptian people. Said Harara, “But when I saw on Facebook the words ‘The people want the fall of the regime,’ I went down there on the 26th.”⁸⁷

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 mobilisation was made evident when Western corporations Google and Twitter teamed together to offer “Speak2Tweet” services after President Mubarak

⁸⁵ Ibid., 153

⁸⁶ “Episode One,” *How Facebook Changed the World: The Arab Spring*, BBC 2, 5 September 2011, Television.

⁸⁷ Abigail Hauslohner, “Why I Protest: Ahmed Harara of Egypt,” 14 December, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102138_2102236,00.html, accessed 15 December, 2011.

shut down Internet access across the nation. Lebanese technology entrepreneur Habib Haddad collaborated with Google and Twitter and organised 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 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.

Chapter 4: The dialectics of the Internet

A.) The Importance of Context

⁸⁸ Bhuiyan 2011, 18

⁸⁹ "US asks Twitter to maintain service after Iran vote:official," Google News, June 16, 2009, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jxRTCxOmFcVVpTkAoeQsIDQK5z7g>, accessed 10 December, 2010.

In the same way that globalisation affects different actors in different ways, so too does the Internet stimulate different users in different ways. The fundamental mistake made by cyber-utopians is the assumption that the Internet is a “deterministic one-directional force for either global liberation or oppression, for cosmopolitanism or xenophobia,” when in reality, the Internet can and has allowed all these forces to flourish online. When applied to its use as a pro-democracy tool in authoritative states, it is also important to remember that no two states can be expected to react to the Internet in the same manner. “While all unfree societies are alike, each unfree society is unfree in its own way.”⁹⁰ In the Arab Spring, it became evident that though Tunisian and Egyptian activists were seemingly able to exploit the benefits of social networking to great success, in other Arab states, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, protesters who tried to replicate strategies used in Egypt were quickly crushed by state-led security forces.

The Egyptian example discussed in this dissertation is not the first example of social networking being used for voicing political dissent. In 2009, Twitter was used as a forum for protest in Iran following the highly controversial election of President Ahmadinejad. The United States eagerly applauded the Green Movement for its use of social media to spread democratic sentiment, which fit nicely with Western motives and policies. However, in the months following the election the Green Movement lost its momentum and faded into the background, proof of the difficulty of sustaining online activism and transforming it into an offline reality.

⁹⁰ Morozov 2011, 29

More recently, the networking capabilities of social media were utilized in the riots taking place in London during the summer of 2011. In fact, the London riots share other similarities besides the use of social media with the Egyptian uprising. Both were triggered by the unjustified death of a young man. In Egypt, the murder of Khaled Said by Egyptian police led to the creation of the Facebook page *We Are All Khaled Said* which later became instrumental in organizing protests. In London, the shooting of Mark Duggan by police sparked riots that deteriorated into senseless looting. Additionally, both scenarios were answered by government efforts to shut down access to these social media tools. In Egypt, this resulted in a full nationwide Internet blackout, which did little to quell protesters. In London, David Cameron announced he would do “whatever it takes” to end the unrest, including banning the use of social networking sites, including Facebook and Twitter.⁹¹ This comparison reveals the importance of context when judging the potentialities of the Internet and social media as a force for good. In this example, the tools of social networking that were previously heralded as forces for promoting and entrenching democracy by Western authorities were soon treated as foes when used to fuel civil unrest in London.

Another false assumption made by cyber-Utopians is to treat the Internet as a universal remedy for all political ills, especially regarding authoritarian regimes. It is here that we truly see the Internet as a “tool without a handle,”⁹² for though it can

⁹¹ Josh Halliday, “David Cameron considers banning suspected rioters from social media,” *The Guardian*, 11 August, 2011
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/11/david-cameron-rioters-social-media>, accessed 13 December, 2011.

⁹² Morozov 2011

be seen to possess enormous liberating potential, it is harnessing this potential and translating it into political reality that proves itself to be far harder to accomplish. It is in these situations that context must be considered. "The main thing to keep in mind, though, is that different contexts give rise to different problems and thus are in need of custom-made solutions and strategies."⁹³ In the context of the Egyptian uprisings, social media did play a role in organising the protests and bringing to the attention of the international community, voices that had previously not been given a platform for dissent. However, at the time of writing, closing in on a year after the "revolution," chaos and protest continue and the activists that took to the streets a year ago remain unsatisfied. "Most of the Western efforts to use the Internet in the fight against authoritarianism could best be described as trying to apply a poor cure to the wrong disease."⁹⁴

The problems in Egypt that have led to civil unrest are deep-seated political and economic issues that cannot be solved alone by the Internet, though it may play a role in strengthening pro-democracy movements.

B.) The state of Egypt post-revolution

⁹³ Ibid., 111

⁹⁴ Ibid., 31

The fact that Mubarak's regime crumbled within 18 days of protests organized online, says less about the nature of Facebook and more about the nature of his regime. "In terms of their impact [on the Arab world, new media] seem more like a stress reliever than a mechanism for political change," argues Rami Khouri, of Lebanon's *The Daily Star*.⁹⁵ In fact, this may be where we see the largest obstacle to online political activism translating into actual political change in the long-term. Though it is easy to join a group on Facebook denouncing the rule of Mubarak and sign on to virtual campaigns for change, this type of "slacktivism" is not as effective as the established conventional oppositional movements that while may not be perfect, "are often the only hope that such [authoritarian] societies have."⁹⁶ This is the reality today in Egypt, almost one year after the protests began, and the youths who flooded the public squares of Egypt's cities are not seeing their political imaginings and demands reflected in the polls. Despite the numerous new oppositional parties that have formed or strengthened since January 2011, the first round of parliamentary elections has placed in the lead the two most prominent Islamist parties, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Nour Party, respectively.⁹⁷ Failing to form a cohesive political party, the diffuse youth activist movements are only beginning what is sure to be a long road of establishing a respected political

⁹⁵ Ibid., 202

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ The Telegraph, "Egyptian youth 'decimated' in parliamentary elections, says Mohamed ElBaradei," *The Telegraph*, 05 December, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8934814/Egyptian-youth-decimated-in-parliamentary-elections-says-Mohamed-ElBaradei.html>, accessed 16 December, 2011.

presence, and in the mean time, will have to collaborate with the prevailing oppositional Islamist groups.

So where will social media find a role in Egyptian politics today? As civil unrest continues, Twitter remains an outlet for citizen journalism, while protesters continue their struggle for political legitimacy. (See Appendix D for an example of how Twitter is being used to document the current unrest in Egypt.) The process of changing political culture is long and challenging. To expect deep-seated change within only one year of the first protest would go against all evidence of historical experience. Though aspects of social change and revolution have been accelerated by the use of the Internet and social media, it is obvious that they have yet to demonstrate the same capabilities in more long-term change. Perhaps where social media has contributed the most successfully is in allowing for a more independent press to flourish. An independent and transparent media is regarded as an essential corollary of democratic society, and social media have played a defining role in “acting as a check” on repressive government.⁹⁸ Therefore, social media are an important tool for political protest, though they cannot be treated as a form of social activism independent from the individuals who use them. As Elizabeth Iksander aptly surmises, the use of social media is an example of how “speeches, articles, images, and documents are constantly being recorded and placed online to create an accessible archive of information. This has a cathartic effect for a society that has operated under oppression and censorship.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Iksander 2011, 1234

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the role of social media networks in the Egyptian uprisings of January and February 2011, using a content analysis of primary sources of social media outlets as well as examining a cross-section of secondary source accounts from the mainstream media and academic journals. Though there is a range of opinion as to how influential social media was in generating political mobilisation in the Egyptian uprisings, it has been argued in this paper that its main roles were in providing an organisational infrastructure, as a form of alternative press, and as generating awareness both domestically and internationally of the ongoing revolution. By analysing 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 itself to be the main obstacle to protesters gaining political legitimacy.

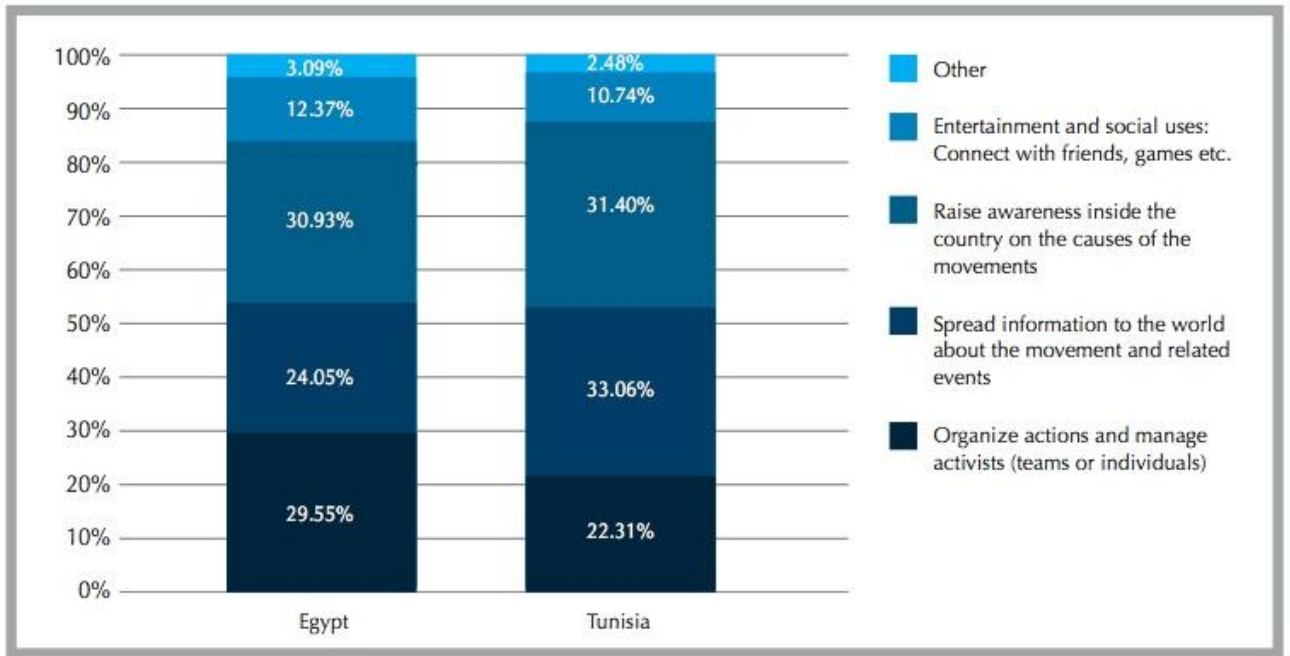
The creators of social media that have been eulogized as liberators in the Arab Spring are given attention by the mainstream media, and treated as experts in the field. In 2009, as a result of the media excitement over Twitter's use in the Green Movement, the micro-blogging site and its creators were 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 always been 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 Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube 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 it's 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 "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.

Appendix

Appendix A¹⁰⁰

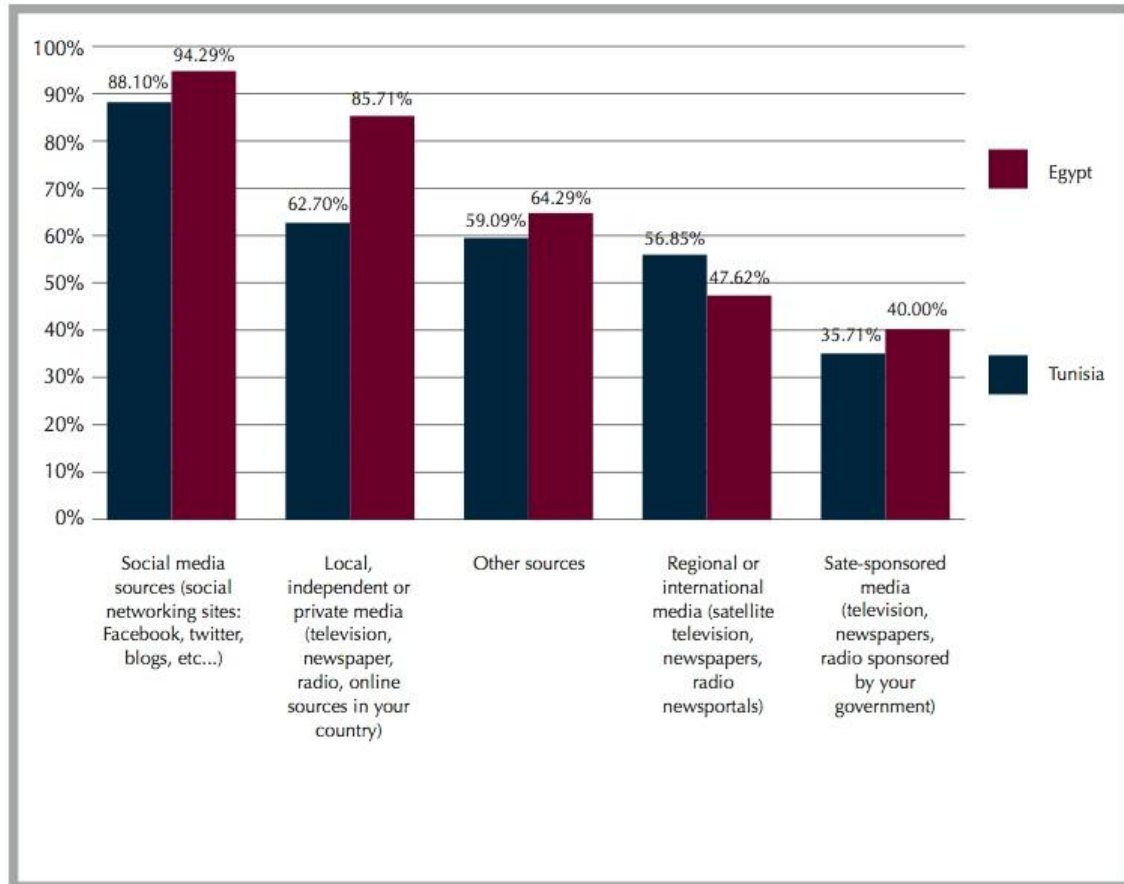
Figure 7: The Main Usage of Facebook during the Civil Movement and Events in Early 2011 was to:



¹⁰⁰ Arab Social Media Report 2011, 6

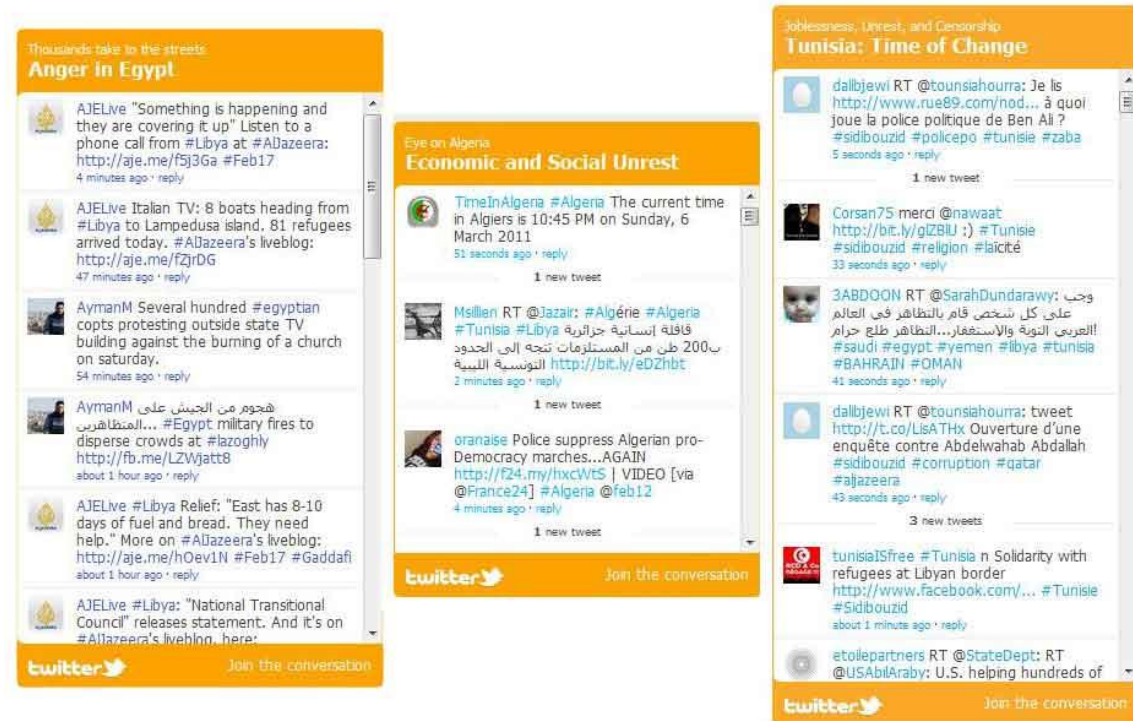
Appendix B¹⁰¹

Figure 11: Where did you get your news/information on the events during the civil movements?



¹⁰¹ Arab Social Media Report 2011, 8

Appendix C: Example of Twitter conversations organized by topic¹⁰²



¹⁰² "Egypt: Relive the Revolution," Al-Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/03/2011368587809435.html>, accessed 16 December, 2011.

Appendix D: December 16, 2011: Twitter user Sharif Kouddos documents protests in Cairo¹⁰³



¹⁰³ Sharif Kouddous' Twitter Feed, <https://twitter.com/#!/sharifkouddous>, accessed 16 December, 2011.

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