

The Emerging Role of Social Media in Political and Regime Change

By Rita Safranek



Over one million protestors demonstrate in Cairo's Tahrir Square on 9 February, 2011
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tahrir_Square_-_February_9,_2011.png

In the spring of 2011, the world watched as revolutionary fervor swept the Middle East, from Tunisia, to Egypt, to Syria and beyond. Startling images captured by civilians on the scene were viewed by people around the world, courtesy of distribution via

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and even mainstream media. There can be no doubt that information and communication technologies, in particular burgeoning social media, played a part in the upheavals. But, questions continue to dog political theorists and social scientists – just how much of a role did the different media play and which ones in which countries provided the biggest impact?

Social Media

In 2004, Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook as a way to connect with fellow students. Initially adopted by high school and college students, the social network, according to its 2012 initial public offering filing, has grown to 845 million active users worldwide, with approximately 161 million active monthly users in the US, making it the premiere social media service in the world. If Facebook were a country it would be the third largest behind China and India. Launched in July 2006, Twitter is an online social networking and microblogging service that has grown to over 300 million users as of 2011, according to account tracker Twopcharts. It allows users to exchange photos, videos, and messages of 140 characters or less. Founded in 2005 by Steve Chen and Chad Hurley, YouTube provides a forum for the distribution of video content – everything from cute kittens sleeping to first-run television programs to eyewitness

videos of political protests. The two created the site based on their own frustration when trying to share video files.

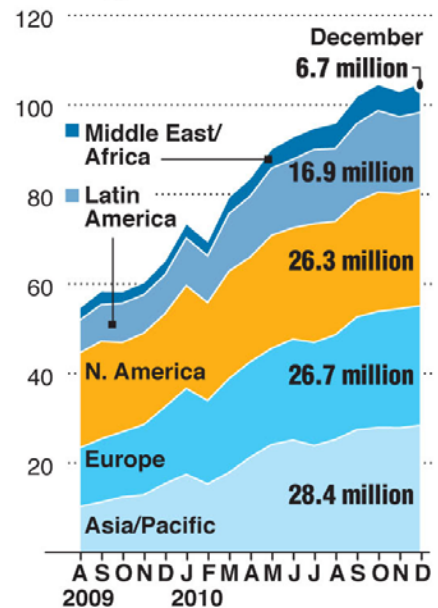
Part of the attraction of these "big three" social media services and independent blogging is that the average person, with little or no advanced computer skills, can have good success using them; content can be created and accessed with as little as a smartphone; and it can be easily intertwined. Links to videos posted on YouTube can be embedded in blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. A Twitter post can appear on a Facebook page. In other words, large numbers of people can be easily and inexpensively contacted via a variety of services.

Social media also lowers traditional socio-economic barriers to commanding the spotlight. You don't have to "be somebody" to "be somebody" on social media. Whether it is a suburban high school girl singing her ode to Friday night, a pair of octogenarians figuring out their laptop's camera, or dogs that sing, social media has vaulted them into our consciousness. Politicians, regimes, and activists look to purposefully tap into the potential of social media. "The Internet, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook have reconstituted, especially among young people, how social relationships are constructed and how communication is produced, mediated, and received. They have also ushered in a new regime of visual imagery in which screen culture creates spectacular events just as much as they record them. Under such circumstances, state power becomes more porous and there is less control. Text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the Internet have given rise to a reservoir of political energy that posits a new relationship between the new media technologies, politics, and public life" (Giroux). These digital technologies influence the formation and activities of civil society groups: mobs, movements, and civil society organizations. While mass popular protests are by no means a new phenomenon, digital tools are facilitating their formation (Etling et al 38).

twitter Global reach

Although much of the social networking service's traffic flows through third-party applications and mobile devices, making its true size difficult to calculate, most users visit Twitter.com at least once per month, a statistic that offers a reasonable estimate of active global users.

Unique visitors to Twitter.com, monthly, in millions



Source: ComScore
Graphic: Chicago Tribune © 2011 MCT

Chart showing unique visitors to Twitter.com, monthly, in millions and by geographic region; the social networking site is growing globally. eLibrary

The Middle East and North Africa region has one of the most youthful populations in the world, with people under 25 making up between 35-45% of the population in each country. They make up the majority of social media users, including about 17 million Facebook users, 25,000 Twitter accounts and 40,000 active blogs, according to the Arab Advisors Group. YouTube is extremely popular, with an average of 24 hours of video uploaded from the region every minute ("MIDDLE EAST"). The Dubai School of Government has issued a report indicating that the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world increased by 78% during 2010, from 11.9 million in January 2010 to 21.3 million in December 2010 ("Social Media a Catalyst").

Political Unrest and Social Media

The Philippines

On January 17, 2001, during the impeachment trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada, loyalists in the Philippine Congress voted to set aside key evidence against him. Less than two hours after the decision, activists, with the help of forwarded text messages, were able to organize a protest at a major crossroads in Manila. Over the next few days, over a million people arrived. "The public's ability to coordinate such a massive and rapid response – close to seven million text messages were sent that week – so alarmed the country's legislators that they reversed course and allowed the evidence to be presented. ... The event marked the first time that social media had helped force out a national leader" (Shirkey). On January 20, 2011, Estrada resigned.

Moldova

The first widely-recognized use of social media as a tool of political revolution occurred in Moldova in 2009. Activists used Facebook, LiveJournal (an electronic diary service/social network), and Twitter to organize protests and bring attention to the political unrest in the former Soviet republic. Interestingly enough, during the protests, Russian-language Tweeters debated the role of social-networking tools in organiz-



Protest riots in front of the Parliament of Moldova, 7 April 2009
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chisinau_riot_2009-04-07_01.jpg

ing the demonstration (Hodge). On April 6, 2009, following disputed general elections, protests broke out in the capital. On April 7, protestors were joined by opposition leaders in front of government offices in the capital. The demonstrators' numbers had grown from 10,000 the day before to nearly 30,000, in a metropolitan area of about 900,000. "Word had been spreading rapidly via Twitter and other online networking services. The official media carried no coverage, but accounts, pictures, and video of the rally were appearing in real time on Twitter and YouTube" (Mungiu-Pippidi & Munteanu). Although the protestors failed to prompt a change of leadership or a new election, they got the world to focus on a small, remote country, and digital activism became recognized as a source of political power (Amin).

Iran

In June 2009, Neda Agha-Soltan and some friends headed to the center of Tehran, Iran, to join an anti-government protest following the disputed presidential election. Stuck in traffic, she got out of the car. Agha-Soltan was shot and died. Video of her death was captured on a cell phone. "With links to the video posted on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, the amateur clip eventually harnessed the attention of the mainstream media, grabbing headlines on CNN and in the 'New York Times.' Agha-Soltan's death became a symbol for the Iranian anti-government movement, and online social media amplified that symbol for the rest of the world to see" (Amin).

The emergence of such a video flew in the face of Iran's strong media censorship. It forced not only new crackdowns but also a move by the ruling government to exploit the same digital interfaces that were used against it. "It posted erroneous information about protest meeting times and locations, and unsuspecting citizens showed up to be met by baton-wielding militia forces" (Amin). The regime also planned to mobilize 15,000 members of the Basij paramilitary forces to suppress demonstrators in Tehran (Hughes). Iran's civil resistance movement is unique because the government's tight control of media and the Internet has spawned a generation adept at circumventing cyber roadblocks, making the country ripe for a technology-driven protest movement (Schleifer).

Social media proponents promoted the technology's role in the Iranian unrest, but a closer look reveals a more complicated picture. "Although there was a great deal of excitement about the role of Twitter in Iran after the presidential election more recent evidence indicates that twitter conversation about the Iranian protest occurred mostly among those in the West, and most likely was not used by Iranians to organize. Instead, Twitter and other social media were used to report protest events as they unfolded, replacing the foreign press and also creating international support for the movement" (Etling). Research into the Iranian blogosphere shows that political and religious conservatives are no less prominent than regime critics ("Reading Twitter in Tehran?"). While the movement was unsuccessful in forcing change, it continues to exist, still using social

media as a way to communicate within Iran and with others around the world who are sympathetic to their cause.

Tunisia

In December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi set fire to himself – “a desperate act of defiance following his denied attempts to work as a street vendor to support his family. ... The scenes of his self-immolation captured by passers-by and posted on YouTube as well as those of the mass protests that followed his funeral, quickly circulated in Tunisia and beyond” (Cottle).

On January 11th protests reached the centre of the capital city Tunis, and Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali responded by ordering in the army and imposing a night-time curfew. The next day, tens of thousands took to the streets in Sfax, Tunisia’s second city (“International: No Sign of an End”). On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali fled the country, ousted by a spontaneous populous uprising. “Tunisia's population of 10 million people, known for their high levels of education and civic pride, became the first people in the Arab world to take to the streets and oust a leader“(Chrisafis).

Although Tunisia’s government practiced some of the most repressive Internet censorship, the country has one of the most connected populations in the region outside the Gulf; 33% of the population is online, 16% on Facebook and 18% using Twitter. “Although the Ben Ali regime blocked YouTube during the month of unrest, it did not entirely block Internet access, and seasoned cyber activists played bridging roles, re-posting videos and Facebook content about protests from closed loops of private networks to Twitter and online news portals with greater reach. “(“Middle East: Social Media Outwit Authoritarianism”) Also, Tunisia witnessed a sudden eight percent surge in the number of Facebook users during the first two weeks of January 2011, coupled with a shift in the usage turned from merely social in nature into primarily political (“Social Media a Catalyst for Reform”).

The protests, nicknamed the “Jasmine revolution,” led to the installation of a coalition government following elections. While new technology helped opposition leadership organize protests and easily communicate with followers, “it is simplistic to say social media caused [Tunisia’s] Jasmine revolution; the underlying economic and political causes were decades in the making. It is also unlikely that Facebook and Twitter will fill the leadership vacuum that now exists in the country” (Rash).

Egypt

Google executive Wael Ghonim helped spark Egypt’s 2011 unrest. Egyptian businessman Khaled Said died after being beaten by police, who had videotaped themselves taking confiscated marijuana. Hoping to draw attention to police corruption, he copied that video and posted it to YouTube. Ghonim created a Facebook page called ‘We Are all Khaled Said.’



An editorial cartoon by Carlos Latuff depicting a Khaled Said holding up a tiny, flailing version of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Khaled_Mohamed_Saeed_holding_up_a_tiny_flailing_stone-faced_Hosni_Mubarak.png

It featured horrific photos, shot with a cellphone in the morgue, of Said's face. That visual evidence undermined the official explanations of his death. The Facebook page attracted some 500,000 members ("Information Age: Egypt's Revolution"). Protestors flooded Cairo's Tahrir Square under the watchful eye of a military that was loath to turn on citizens. To thwart the protestors, the government sought to block access to Facebook and Twitter and severely restrict access to the Internet. The strategy failed because the insurgents, with help from supporters around the world, were able to subvert the censorship.

Also, Internet restrictions negatively affected companies' and the government's ability to do business. Under increasing domestic and international pressure, longtime Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak resigned February 11, 2011, following 18 days of protests.

"With a population of about 80 million and median age of 24, Egypt has nearly 4 million Facebook users, representing about 5% of the population." ("Middle East") During the week before Mubarak's resignation, the total rate of tweets from Egypt – and around the world – about political change in that country increased from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day. Videos featuring protest and political commentary went viral – the top 23 videos received nearly 5.5 million views. The amount of content produced online by opposition groups, in Facebook and political blogs, increased dramatically ("New Study Quantifies").

"At its core, the revolution represents a force that is much more willing to criticize authority, and tolerate diversity, than perhaps mainstream public opinion. The original throngs that fought riot police drew on at least three major and messily overlapping constituencies. First were the activists - organizers of all political and religious stripes who had come to trust each other over years of strikes, tiny protests and mass arrests. Second were the politicized people previously afraid to challenge the regime but who brought to the protests a distinct agenda - labor unionists, socialists, liberal NGO [non-government organizations] workers and more conservative religious ac-

tivists. Finally, there were the hundreds of thousands of angry and apolitical Egyptians sick of Mubarak's police state" (Cambanis).

Lebanon, Syria, and Libya

"As the protests spread across the Arab world, activists in Lebanon began to unite with the goal of 'ousting the sectarian system.' These activists managed to reach around 15,000 people through a Facebook group entitled "In favor of ousting the Lebanese sectarian system – towards a secular system." The group is comprised of youth from different sects, regions, and cultural backgrounds" ("Social Media Creating Social Awareness"). However, it was the sectarian and divided nature of Lebanese youth partisanship that rendered it difficult to use social media to mobilize young people through a common goal ("Grasp of Social Media").

Social media played a different role in Tunisia's and Egypt's anti-government protests than in Libya and Yemen. "There is not the kind of strong tradition of online activism in Libya and Yemen as there is in other Arab countries" (Riley). In Libya, there is a lack of Internet infrastructure, online access is difficult, and the Gadhafi regime has limited social media. "In Yemen, government controls and extreme poverty limit Internet use" (Riley).

Unfortunately, in these countries, technological barriers to social media coupled with severe totalitarian regimes stymied reform efforts.

"Twitter Revolution" Critics

The importance of social media in this latest wave of political upheaval has political theorists and social scientists lining up in opposing camps. "While techno-utopians overstate the affordances of new technologies (what these technologies can give us) and understate the material conditions of their use (e.g., how factors such as gender or economics can affect access), technodystopians do the reverse, misinterpreting a lack of results with the impotence of technology; and also, forgetting how shifts within the realm of mediated political communication can be incremental rather than a seismic in nature" (Christensen).

One of the most vocal critics in the US has been *New Yorker* writer Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*. He points out that "the platforms of social media are built around weak ties. Social networks are effective at increasing participation by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires." He argues that these types of relationships are not conducive to the sustained, hierarchical, and high-risk behavior needed to make real social change as seen in the US civil rights movement in the 1960s (42).

There are two arguments against the idea that social media will make a difference in national politics. The first is that the tools are themselves ineffective, and the second is that they produce as much harm to democratization as good, because repressive governments are becoming better at using these tools to suppress dissent (Shirky).

"Facebook and Twitter have their place in social change, but real revolutions take place in the street. One of the biggest obstacles in using social media for political change is that people need close personal connections in order to get them to take action – especially if that action is risky and difficult. Social media always comes with a catch: It is designed to do the very thing that isn't particularly helpful in a high-risk situation" (Rosenberg).



A 21 March 2006 demonstration held at October Square in Minsk after the Belarus president elections.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Minsk_opposition_meeting_after_presidential_election_2.JPG

While the upheavals in the Middle East have cast a positive light on the use of social media to effect change, "there are, however, many examples of the activists failing, as in Belarus in March 2006, when street protests (arranged in part by e-mail) against President Aleksandr Lukashenko's alleged vote rigging swelled, then faltered, leaving Lukashenko more determined than ever to control social media. During the June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran, activists used every possible technological coordinating

tool to protest the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi but were ultimately brought to heel by a violent crackdown. The Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010 followed a similar but quicker path: Protestors savvy with social media occupied downtown Bangkok until the Thai government dispersed the protestors, killing dozens" (Shirky).

Twitter's own internal architecture puts limits on political activism. "There are so many messages streaming through at any moment that any single entry is unlikely to break through the din, and the limit of 140 characters – part of the service's charm and the secret of its success – militates against sustained argument and nuance" ("Reading Twitter in Tehran?").

And then there are logistical questions that dog the "Twitter Revolution" claims. "Only 21% of Egyptians use the Internet, less than half the usage rate within Iran and below the average of the entire region. But despite the limited access to the Web, sites like Facebook generated a tremendous amount of pressure on the government from the onset of the Cairo

demonstrations. One protest fan page garnered more than 80,000 followers in a matter of days” (Carafano). In Egypt, the role of the unofficial trade unions in the protests has been downplayed - workers who participated in strikes, those bus drivers, factory workers, and Suez canal laborers, nurses and doctors, that finally broke President Hosni Mubarak (Hulaimi).

Social Media’s Role

The question arises - once the dust has cleared, where does social media fit into the new paradigm? “What we are seeing is revolutions where the lowering in the cost of transaction of organizing is allowing for these decentralized forces to actually push revolution but without creating those kinds of long lasting structures which, for example, can become political parties after the regime has been toppled” (“The United States Institute of Peace”).

Manuel Castells has conceptualized how new network configurations can lead to new political movements by allowing previously disconnected, undeveloped political identities to take shape and rise to a prominent position (Castells). This is particularly applicable to Arab countries where religions and ethnic divides previously prevented networking. “Many Arab regimes banned the creation of political parties and limited the right to associate or create civil rights groups. This meant that there was little space where religious, ethnic, and cultural groups could meet and interact. ... But social media has helped such groups discover one another and break the psychological barrier of fear between them” (“Social Media Creating Social Awareness”). Political discussion in blogs presaged the turn of popular opinion in both Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia, conversations about liberty, democracy and revolution on blogs and on twitter often immediately preceded mass protests” (“New Study Quantifies”).

According to Srdja Popvic of CANVAS, a group that teaches democracy movements how to engage in non-violent struggle, social media has three uses: “It is an efficient and cheap



A picture posted on Twitter’s photo-sharing website TwitPic by the user madyar shows supporters of defeated Iranian presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi taking part in a rally in Tehran on June 17, 2009
eLibrary

way to give members information – much better than putting up posters. It also conveys to members the highly motivating realization that they have big numbers – people who know their pro-democracy Facebook group has 70,000 members will be much more excited and less fearful than people unaware they are part of a big group. And it is an efficient way to transfer skills and information” (Rosenberg).

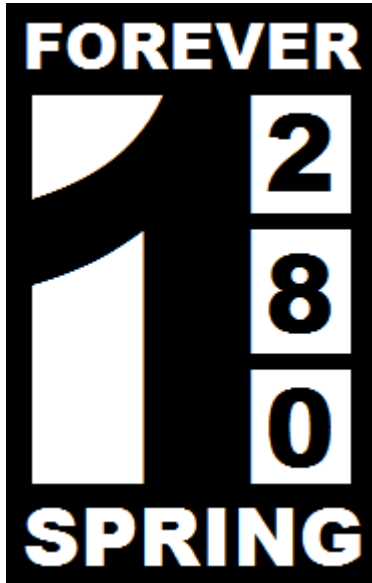
One of the leading social-media movement proponents in the US is New York University professor Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody*. He believes that “the more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere” and “social media can compensate for the disadvantages of undisciplined groups by reducing the costs of coordination. Larger, looser groups can now take on some kinds of coordinated action, such as protest movements and public media campaigns that were previously reserved for formal organizations. For political movements, one of the main forms of coordination is what the military calls ‘shared awareness,’ the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand, but also understand that everyone else does too. Social media increase shared awareness by propagating messages through social networks. Political culture heightens the conservative dilemma by providing cover for more political uses of social media. Tools specifically designed for dissident use are politically easy for the state to shut down, whereas tools in broad use become much harder to censor without risking politicizing the larger group of otherwise apolitical actors” (Shirky). Regime shutdowns, which technologically-savvy protestors have proven to be fairly adept at subverting, alert the international community to problems within countries.

“New media can have an impact by helping to transform individuals and give them new competencies that empower them in politics. This can be something as simple as taking a picture or a video with a smartphone, uploading that image of that footage to YouTube” (“The United States Institute of Peace”). A second impact is “the way that new media draws external attention from citizens and governments outside the country or the region to that country or region to the place that is experiencing protest or conflict” (“The United States Institute of Peace”). In this sense, the new media are a megaphone. “It is difficult to prove that communication via new media or social media is actually what brings people to the streets, especially in societies which have relatively low degrees of Internet penetration and Internet access. Perhaps the best illustration of the threat this information poses to authoritarian governments is their reaction to it. States have made a number of efforts to rein in Internet speech, including Internet” (“The United States Institute of Peace”).

Conclusion

For all that it does, social media is no “silver bullet” when it comes to political change. “The use of social media tools – text messaging, e-mail, photo-sharing, social network, and the like – does not have a single preordained outcome. Therefore attempts to outline their effects on political action are too often reduced to dueling anecdotes” (Shirky). Factors that seem to impact its suc-

Successful use include the size, ethnic diversity, and education levels of the population, the existence of a modern telecommunications infrastructure, and the amount of censorship used by the existing regime. Social media has limited impact at best on an important factor affecting nascent revolutions – a regime's willingness to use force to squelch protests. Egyptian protests grew because the Army would not turn against citizens engaged in peaceful protest. Iranian protests petered out when leaders used force to crack down on those speaking out, both in public and in the cybersphere.



A commemorative logo for the Arab Spring which began on the 18th of December 2010
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Spring.png>

Moving forward, "the activities of social movements will gain influence only to the extent that they are able to avoid the scrutiny and controls of the state. A challenge for improving the prospects of digitally-assisted political reform in closed societies that must rely on decentralized networks is to adapt, emulate and transfer the benefits of highly organized civil society groups, as bottom-up decentralized organizing is more likely to survive in repressive regimes." (Etling).

Research suggests that protests, when effective, are the end of a process, rather than a replacement for it. Political freedom has to be accompanied by a society literate enough and densely connected enough to discuss the issues presented to the public (Shirky). "The real lesson is that the cyber-verse gives no side a decisive, unassailable advantage" (Carfano). For groups that have felt powerless against repressive regimes, social media's technological leveling of the political playing field provides one of the most important components of any successful revolution – hope.

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