

The Role and Impacts of Social Media in Social Movements: “Example of the Arab Spring”

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Abstract

With the developments in communication technologies, people have experienced big transformations about communicating and sharing information in their daily and social life. New communication networks provided by these developments allow people to get more reliable and secure information or knowledge. That is, people can get first-hand information directly without using secondary sources. Social media tells the usage of mobile vehicles effectively on internet. According to this kind of communication style, users can show their personal interests, share photos or videos with other users by using their personal pages. Members can also see others' personal pages and they can communicate by using instant messaging part of personal pages. Content shared in social media can be spread quickly and people can get possibility of arguing these contents and information. These possibilities provide social media to play an important role in political spectrum. For example, in last three years social movements organized by using social media could overthrow oppressive governments or dictators in North Africa and Middle East. These examples prove that social media has gained an importance determining politics and social movements. In this study, impacts and importance of social media on “Arab Spring” which is going on increasing its importance in Middle East will be taken in hand and specifically the study will focus on the role of social media on “Arab Spring”. Eventually it was understood that social media is not the results of “Arab Spring”, actually it has turned into a vehicle which made huge contributions to these social movements.

Keywords: Social Movements, Arab Spring, Social Media, Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Introduction

In recent years, the most appropriate way to explain the political change in Arabic world has been internet, mobile phones and the social networking such as Facebook and Twitter. The masses in the expectation of democracy have not only produced large sharing network through using those technologies but also organized their political responses at unprecedented speed (Howard & Hussain, 2011: 35-36).

According to some researchers, social networking sites are the basic driving force behind the social movements which were started against authoritarianism and oppressive regimes in Northern Africa and Middle East (Webster, 2011; Cohen, 2011). Some other experts state that the role of social networking sites in the street demonstrations has been exaggerated. The authors in this group regard the key factors in the development of revolution as the failures of the oppressive and authoritarian states in resolving the problems such as unemployment, backwardness, financial problems, illegality, and illegitimacy (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011; Tüfekci & Wilson, 2012).

As Tüfekci and Wilson'un (2012: 365) stated, social networking forms only a part of the political communication system which emerges in the Arabic Geography. According to the authors, new political communication system has three structures which are connected to each other and interpenetrated. The first one is the television channels such as Al-Jazeera which broadcast on satellite and provide contributions to the formation of a new generation in the Arab world. The second is the decreasing cost of the mobile phones and their dimension from the point of sharing materials such as video and photograph. The third one is the rapid proliferation of the internet and social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook which change the infrastructure of social interaction.

The significance of social networking sites in the formation of political activism in the Arab Geography has become more apparent by years. Among the 70 street demonstrations from 2004 to 2011 in Egypt, for example, 54 of them were organized online (Lim, 2012: 232). In this respect, both demonstrators and dictators immediately understood that new communication technologies and mobile phones form a significant information infrastructure for political discussion. Especially, the constraint of freedom of assembling meetings and the difficulties of women in participating in those meetings in the Arab countries having oppressive regimes lack of democracy was sorted out to some extent (Howard & Parks, 2012: 360).

In this study designed from the literature review, the political and social developments in the Arab Geography will be discussed; social movements will be conceptually defined; the role of media in the social movements will be theoretically introduced. After those theoretical discussions, in accordance with the basic objectives of the study, the role and importance of the social networking sites in the Arab Spring will be presented to the readers.

1. Social Movements: A Theoretical Perspective

When the literature review is carried out, the increase in the amount of studies carried out in the world about social movements. The interest of scientists who work within different disciplines of social science about the social movements and the literature developing related to the topic may be seen as a result of the changes social sciences have been experiencing during the twentieth

century. Of course, it is possible that social movements have a response in the classical scientific conceptions and theories. However, the discussions in the philosophy of social sciences and developing new approaches caused reconsideration of social movements and the discussions related to it in various platforms (Akın, 2012: 88).

Social movements occur in the form of a definite organization as a result of encountering a structural compound containing numerous contradictions in the principle. From the point of system, every movement causes the interference of political tool that aims to protect the regime, namely, the opposite movement. Basic request of all the social movements is to reach a more democratic and more equal ideal of the world (Işık, 2012: 6-7).

One of the most significant characteristics of social movements is their foundation on the interactions between the individuals. In fact, the quality and maintenance of the interaction make the social movements more effective. The prerequisite of contributing this success lies in the conclusion they reached as a result of interaction through reuniting the knowledge, savings, expectations and hopes of the individuals in the interaction and jointly embrace the obtained production (Uyar, 2003: 137). According to Çetinkaya (2008: 26), the interaction of the organizers of the movement and the use of various social networks play a significant role in the emerging of a movement beside the political system covering it.

At this point, public opinion has always been a tool since the objective of social movements is to affect the decision mechanism as much as possible through numerous activities. For that reason, the social movements show the inclination of continuously forcing the individuals in the decision mechanism on political and administrative fields to a definite behavior through the public support. In order to execute it, it may develop a sense of cooperation through often interacting with other social groups (Kılıç, 2009: 155).

The social movements which progress through dynamism produced by cooperation are collectively resisting to the imposition of the system which they have been protesting through conflicts. At this point, social activities are formed through a “*collective interaction*” as a form of collective behavior (Işık, 2013: 14). In fact, the quality and maintenance of the interaction make the social movements more effective. The prerequisite of contributing this success lies in the conclusion they reached as a result of interaction through reuniting the knowledge, savings, expectations and hopes of the individuals in the interaction and jointly embrace the obtained production (Uyar, 2003: 137). Again, social movements have the potential of being significant tools of political participation rather than only political interests or the expression of the political opponents (Dirlik, 2008: 69).

Shortly, the problems related to the social relations existing in a society may pile up and turn into a driving force of a process of change. Such problems generally affect the social groups such as definite communities, nations, classes, racial, ethnic and social groups, religious and political grouping and others. The process may begin when some people internally interrogate and reject some aspects of status quo. The process will gain a social identity when people discover that the others also had similar experiences, point out same questions, and show the tendency of raising same objections (Işık, 2013: 19).

2. The “Arab Spring” as a Social Movement

In the large geography containing North Africa and Middle East, the grassroots movement which finally overthrows the dictators who remain in the office for almost two generations which national leader join and leave political scenes during their ruler ship and have the capacity of remaining in the power unless they are interfered at the end of a few months of bloody struggles are called “Arab Spring”. It is a coincidence that this process which began in the “Winter” of January 2011 and matured during the spring months released the majority of Arab societies from the Winter conditions which they have been experiencing for many years and were nearly frozen from the perspective of political development and put into the mood of spring which is the symbol of hope (Kibaroglu, 2011: 26; Erdem, 2012: 166).

The Arab Spring which has caused huge changes in the Arab world, has spread from country to country through domino effect, having similar slogans and demands despite basic differences at national level, it is not known where and when they will end and has had a tremendous impact with its denomination created a response to the negativities such as political corruption, chronic unemployment which is worsening day by day, discrimination in the economic and politic administration and restriction in the freedom for expression and created convulsive effects in the Middle East within a short time (cited by; Duran & Özdemir, 2012: 185; Öztürkler & Keskingöz, 2012: 19). Besides, some events on a small scale were observed in non-Arab countries such as Iran, Albania, and Armenia (Paksoy et al., 2012: 49).

The Arab Spring began for the first time in Tunisia on December, 18 2010. An unemployed university graduate, Muhammed Bouazizi, who was peddling on the streets, set himself into fire and started the rebellion which has overthrown the government (Howard & Hussain, 2011: 36; Doğan & Durgun, 2012: 62). The rebellion which started in Tunisia set an example for the other Arab countries and spread to North Africa and Middle East. While the Arab Spring was the most effective in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan and Yemen, it was effective on a small scale in Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Morocco (Çildan et al., 2012: 7).

After Tunisia, the Arab Spring which has caused internal war in Egypt and Libya caused serious changes in the government and internal structure of the country within the year of 2011. In Egypt, Hüsnü Mübarek who had been ruling the country for thirty years had to resign. Although the effects of the Arab Spring are clearly observed also in Syria, Beşar Esad is on the way of being overthrown by both internal war and the oppression of foreign powers. The revolution which rapidly spreads caused very heavy results in Libya. Not only Muammer Kaddafi, the head of the state for 42 years, was overthrown but also he was killed by the lynching attempt of the opponents. The council of ministers had to resign in Kuwait in the civil insurrections following the Arab Spring. In Iraq, the Prime Minister Nuri El Maliki stated that he wouldn't be a candidate in the following elections and some local administrators and governors were discharged. In Bahrain, political prisoners were set free and some privileges in economic field were granted. In Morocco, a struggle started against abusiveness due to economic problems and it was decided to conduct a referendum. After the elections, the government has changed. In Oman, the legislative prerogative was given to the congress and a step of democratization was taken. The new order was established with the overthrow of the government in Jordan. In Yemen, some congressmen from the ruling party were forced to resign. Moreover, the President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salih, had to resign in exchange for privileges. In Algeria, the public emergency of the Prime Minister of Algeria which had been going on for 19 years was abolished after huge protests and

rebellions. Sudan President, Hasan Ahmed El Beşir, stated that he wouldn't be a candidate for the elections to be held in 2015 (Eldoğan, 2012).

While defining the background of developments happening in the Arab world, it is necessary to put emphasis on some truth. In most of the countries in Arab geography, there were closed government structures which haven't changed for many years and has been resisting to changes into some extents. Although some of them were kingdoms and the others possessed the name of Republic, their common understanding is the authoritarian and society expelling models. Nevertheless, there is a continuous economic jumping the shark and unemployment at serious levels. Economic poverty, unemployment, desperation of educated youth, demographic oppression formed by the young population, high cost of living and lower level of incomes, social injustice and lawlessness, bribery and the fury caused by economic power and fortune of the leaders lacking of law and their relatives all triggered the social movements. Especially, the revolution on the techniques of communication and telecommunication which globalization brings out has cleared out the way for democratic demands. From now on, people may be mobilized through new communication tools without needing traditional politic organizations. This change started processes which strengthen the Arab public movements and cause new changes. It is necessary to state here that the role of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter became more significant and more critical rather than television, newspaper and radio defined as traditional media in the Arab Spring. In the movements in Tunisia and Egypt, the new media played a key role. Moreover, the Revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia were also called as the "*Revolutions of Facebook and Twitter*" due to this role (Akbaş, 2012: 54-59).

While some people consider the Arab Spring within syber-activism; some others claim that the effect of social media has been exaggerated, the important thing in those movements was the structural structure and it had internal dynamics. However, such a social formation can be evaluated free from neither socio-cultural structure of the geography where it has developed nor current conditions which include globalization. Thus, while evaluating the social activism in the Arab Spring, socio-cultural factors which treats it on the background of "*rebellion policy*" and the revolutionary transformation which the tools brought by "*information age*" experienced in the global dimension in creating a new type of society (Kök & Tekerek, 2012: 60).

3. Social Movements and Media

A continuous interaction between the members of the movement and society is needed from the point of emerging and spreading of social movements. Thus, the process of exchanging information on social field begins. However, communication is not solely enough to create a social movement. For that reason, the most important aspect of communication is its help in revealing common values for both participants of the movement and those who are out of the movement. In the efforts of social groups who live in a political and social world in putting their identity to society, it is important to inform the individuals and groups through media (Işık, 2013: 4).

It is possible to list the contributions of media to social movements as follows (Raschke, 1987: 21; cited by; Kılıç, 2009: 159-160):

a) First of all, media has a significant position in order to provide members to social movement. Media mediates huge masses through affecting them in accordance with the

objectives of movement. On the other hand, the authors in the media also contribute to the enlargement and strengthening of social activities.

b) Media facilitates the formation of a common identity for a social movement and strengthens we-feeling.

c) The success of a social movement generally depends on numerous factors. A wide communication network is needed besides the tools such the establishment of joint cooperation, provision of monetary sources, utilization of the experiences, the success of management and fame. Naturally, it is necessary to be open to the out of the group in order to carry out this. Media helps the social movement both in staying inside a unity and opening outwards. The unity established between social movements and media is supported with other collective actors (associations, party, non-governmental organizations) and gains the power to affect the politics in higher levels.

d) Media, mediates the people who are dominant in the political structure realize social movements and forces them to behave in accordance with the objectives of the movement. Thus, aforementioned problem begins to gain a political character.

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) who state that media affects the spectrum of social movements also claimed that they were considerably dependent to media in order to provide help those movements are supported and have their status approved; they researched how media affected results through focusing the relation between social movements and media. According to the results of the study, the characteristics of a social movement affect the framing style and sympathy of media. The authors emphasized the significance of organization, professionalism and strategy planning and determined that entertainment visual values of the movement created effect (cited by; Şen, 2012: 146).

At this point, it is necessary to consider social movements and virtual activities as two concepts which mutually cooperate with each other not externalize each other. Although classical movements include the types of activities such as strike, demonstrations and marching, hence, such activities have the potential of virtually materializing. Today, many examples of organization on the internet and classical social movement activities are seen to occur. Even, virtual actions executed on the internet organize and gain the potential of maintenance. For that reason, the actors of social movements even establish internet sites in order to be organized and spread the movement (Işık, 2013: 67).

In the social media environments which is based on dual conversations and discussions, which traditional media couldn't provide due to its structure; opponent and alternative expressions, which are not seen in the traditional media may freely find travel ranges. Even, the spoken and discussed topics may find place in traditional media thanks to the power of audience and supporters with the emerging effect (Erbay, 2012: 150-151).

4. Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

Social Networking Sites draw attention as environments designed to develop social interactions in the virtual environment. In such a communication style, the user can exhibit their interests on their personal pages; share their photos and images with other people; or may present data to people about their information (Special & Li-Barber, 2012: 624; Lee & Ma, 2012: 332). The members may see the profiles of each other and mutually get in touch thanks to the applications such as message section similar to email (Hughes et al., 2012: 561; Ellison et al., 2007: 1143). Such interactions appeal to the youth and those who are about to reach to the adolescence related to providing necessary information for friendships or relationships (Pempek et al., 2009: 228; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012: 107).

In the social networking sites, different from the other mass communication tools, sending messages and receiving feedback both occur at the same time; this provides a more effective communication between the parties. However, the users in the social networking sites environment are producers at the same time. Namely, the people using the social networking sites produce the content of the media themselves. Social networking sites, compared to other mass communication tools, are communication environments with availability at individual levels. Whereas, the tools such as television, radio, newspaper etc. send their messages to the masses. On the other hand, social networking sites are also collectively used. Official fan pages of the celebrities in the society express a mass-oriented communication environment rather than inter-individual communication. Social networking sites provide people the opportunity to execute communication of small groups. A few people may get in touch through Facebook, Twitter or MSN at the same time. While mass communication tools such as newspapers, radio, television and cinema are run in the professional manner; there is no need for any professional manner in social networking sites. Social networking sites have exceeded the limitedness of time. For example, a definite program on television can be watched by only in a definite period of time. However, the person who wants to get in touch in the environment of social networking sites may send his mail to the other parties whenever he desires. The other parties become open into the social media environment whenever they like and receive the sent message (Güngör, 2011: 312-314).

5. The Role of Social Media in Social Movements: “The Arab Spring”

After the public movements began in the Middle East and Northern Africa during the first months of the year 2011 utilized from social media as a tool of organization and communication and the experienced social movements are called “*Social Media Revolution*” (Khondker, 2011: 677; Howard & Parks, 2012: 360); the significance of social media and its effect is continuously being discussed. People were organized meetings and broad participation demonstrations through being organized with other social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The dominant communication tool in the encountered public movements during this process, the social networking sites which is used with the purposes such as socialization, entertainment and develop social capital, forms an important aspect of the efforts to understand the events experienced in the region (Babacan et al., 2011: 77).

According to Bostancı (2011), the people who possess similar ideas in the Middle East geography before the Arab Spring and are opponent to the regimes had no idea about the existence of necessary massive support related to changing the regime and the level of power they have. Because; the limited public negotiation in tyrant regimes prevents people from making opposition to the government. Everybody is forced to live with a quiet and isolated fury in their own sole

world. In such an environment, social networking sites (*the courses which the government ignores*) have enabled the opponent powers understand that they have similar power, rapid organization and take to the streets. Twitter, Facebook, mail groups, and SMS's of mobile phones were used for purposes much more different than its functions in Western countries. In fact, those tools transformed the appearances and activities of the revolutionist powers into a mirror they have been watching. In one sense, it was witnessed that the *Spiral of Silence*^{*} was broken. The Egypt government immediately banned the internet, wound the mobile phone companies up and tried to control the social media in order to quell the events; it is significant for understanding the effectiveness of those tools in the Arab Spring. Since the genie is out of the bottle and the masses realized their power and the weakness of the opposite party, however, the precautions of the government didn't work enough.

Another point to be determined here is; as it is traumatically seen in the example of Arab Spring, social networking sites bring freedom of behaviors to the people who have been isolated from identities. The people of Arab geography who found place for them in the social media through covering their faces with masks have the chance of making all their angers and discomfort they have been piling up against tyrant administrations in their daily lives (Bostancı, 2012).

On the other hand, it may be said that the country where the effects of social media was mostly felt was Egypt. When it was 2008, there were 300 thousand blogs in Egypt and 10 thousand of them had political content. In Egypt, the Movement of April 6 and the invitation for it sets a good example for the use of social media. A blog writer who is a member of the group states that "*even they hadn't thought that the events would have such big conclusions after the invitations*". One of the most significant factors in gathering such a big crowd in Tahrir Square on January the 25, 2011 is the social media. It is known that people discussed the applications of the government they didn't approve using social media in Egypt before the Arab Spring. For example, forcing incursion of security forces to houses, being suspicious enough to be arrested and tortures under arrest have been shared and discussed in the social media environments. Even some videos of torture were uploaded to YouTube. In conclusion, it can be easily said that social media provided significant contributions in the preparation of intellectual background for the Arab Spring (Tekek, 2011).

Again in June 2010, the young computer programmer Khaled Said distributed the videos related to the police and drug dealers through channels such as YouTube and Facebook and lost his life after he was arrested in an internet café in Alexandria by the police; thus, it increased the effect and power of the protests in Egypt. The number of the members in the Facebook group of Said who has turned into an icon of the revolution with a site opened under his name reached to 1.5 million during the protests in Egypt (Erbay, 2012: 156; Khondker, 2011: 677).

During the Arab Spring process, the easy control of traditional media increased the interest to new media and social networking sites. For example, an explanation broadcasted from Twitter

* **Spiral of Silence** is a communication theory introduced by German Sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984). According to Neumann, the people who live in the social life with the fear of exclusion and isolation continuously observe and inspect the common thoughts around them and which of them were out of date. So long as their ideas become spread, they clearly express them; nevertheless they hide their opinions so long as their opinions gain marginal aspects (Mutlu, 1998: 321).

account of an Egyptian cyber activist during protests against Mubarek government in Egypt saying; “we used Facebook to determine the times of protests, Twitter to organize the protestors and YouTube to announce those protests to the world” (Bhuiyan, 2011: 16) is rather eye-catching.

Again, another topic to be pointed out is; the number of the users of new media and social networking sites doesn't exceed the 20% of the population although traditional media was widely disseminated in the Middle East before and during the process of Arab Spring. However, these sections of 20% who can use internet in Egypt form the educated and elite part of the society. In a sense, those people who successively organize and execute the civil disobedient activities against oppressive and tyrant administrations come into prominence (Howard & Hussain, 2011: 47).

In the process of time, the development and wide-spreading of new communication technologies caused the transformation of communication methods between the social actors. With the domino effect of Arab Spring at the beginning of the year 2011, especially, social networking sites gathered the opponents under a roof, organized them, and provided the mobilization of masses against dictators. In fact, political and social responses in every country against locally executed injustices were carried out on the social networking sites (Howard & Hussain, 2011: 48). In some ways, as can be seen in the Revolution of Tunisia and Egypt social networking sites played the role of catalyzers. Thanks to new media and social networking sites, local social responses were presented to global public opinion in a definite harmony (Benkirane, 2012: 1).

In conclusion, we can say that this new media environment which is called as social media or “*the second media age*” protected its functionality as a significant communication tool in the Middle East, Northern Africa or any part of the world. However, there are points to be taken into consideration and questions to be answered; *would there be revolution or public movements unless there wasn't social media? Or, wouldn't the fury accumulated after prolonged social pressures or absences be revealed in any way?* Describing the experienced events as the revolution of social media or the revolution of Facebook/ Twitter causes ignoring developments which are significant from the point of the history of the Middle East or the World through paying attention to technological power and role in the West (Babacan, 2011).

When the findings of the study which Darmoni and Poell (2011) analyzed 100 thousand tweets related to the use of social media in the Arab Spring; similar evaluations may be made. According to the authors, the effects of social networking sites can't be understood without recognizing the political, economic and social atmosphere in the Middle East. Moreover, it seems hard to determine without defining who use the social networking sites, the topics the users write about and which language they have been using (Benkirane, 2012: 2). Moreover, putting the blame only on social media related to goings-on in Arab countries such as Egypt and Tunisia has no effect other than camouflaging the real powers to blame. Mass communicative tools, especially the effects of social networking sites, have occurred only at the level of negotiation. Thus, there is no need to reconsecrate McLuhan (Güngör, 2011: 312; Lim, 2012: 234).

Moreover, it is necessary to express that there is need for long-term researches under the light of future developments and experiences in order to reach to final conclusions related to the functions of social media in the process. Socio-economic factors in the countries where the protest wave takes place, the geo-political atmosphere which occur in the countries, the rates of using internet

and social media, the demography of the users, the preference and objectives of use, the periods and density of those courses will be determined through future analyses (Erbay, 2012: 150).

Discussion and Conclusion

The use of social networking sites is rapidly increasing and this enables people freely share their ideas on the internet, establish rapid and mutual communication and be easily organized. Especially, people can easily express their ideas and democratic demands due to the difficulty of censoring on the social networking sites. In this sense, social networking sites found an effective field of use in politic area.

The social movements which began in the Arab geography at the beginning of the year 2011 and is still going on began social networking sites as a tool of meeting and organizing requires analytic thinking on social media and the Arab Spring. In the revolutions in the countries of Middle East and Northern Africa; social networking sites have been used as tools in the occurrence and enlargement of connections, solidarity and organization between various groups and individuals. The members of those networks produced revolutionist messages and succeeded in distributing those messages to their families, close friends and joiners of their parties through mobile phones and digital media. Moreover, the produced revolutionist messages were also distributed to main stream media and satellite channels. Through the most significant of those channels, Al-Jazeera, the revolutionist messages were delivered to people having no internet in the countries such as Tunisia and Egypt.

Social networking sites enables different groups opponent to oppressive regimes in the Arab world both gather under the same roof and make the illegal activities of the authoritarian regimes and their armed forces visible. The desire for democratic change in the Arab world which gather the common values the people having similar thoughts and anxieties was transferred to global public through social media.

However, it is rather difficult to say that social networking sites solely created the Arab Revolution. The basic causes of social movements in the Arab world, as has been stated previously, the failure of the oppressive governments in sorting out problems related to unemployment, backwardness, economic problems, lawlessness, unlawful people and human rights. If social networking sites are considered as the reason or starter of social movements, the main reality will be overshadowed. Social networking sites has functioned as a tool not an objective for Arab population in realizing that they have similar anxieties, speak up their democratic demands louder or becoming organized.

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