

Social Movements in the Digital Age, Their Reflection in the Middle East and the Effect of Social Media

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The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2014
Official Conference Proceedings
0667

Abstract

“It all started in Tunisia” and those social movements spread through Middle East. The fire that sparkled in the East also effected the social movements in the West. The most important similarity in those events was the use of social media. In those networked, global social movements social media played an important role and they were used by the protesters effectively. Trust to the media, governments and politicians whether they are the members of the opposition parties was vanished throughout Europe, United States and Middle East. Some of those movements were started because of the tyranny of the state, the brutality of the police forces and corruption of the governments. As “mass-self communication” medium, internet gives its users an opportunity to spread their thoughts and opinions about everything. The users also can spread news which could not be found in the mainstream media. They can also indicate corruption in politics, police brutality, and the oppression of the state or governments by spreading those materials. Of course internet technology is not the main cause for those social movements, but it became a catalyst for those events. That’s because, in many of the Middle Eastern countries, authorities have tried to ban the “dangerous” sites in order to prevent spreading of the news about corruption. In this research, I will try to examine how individuals share their fears and hopes via social media, first form a virtual community with common ideas, hopes and fears and then became a real community with flesh and blood protesting on city squares.

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The Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring

For the organization of social movements, the role of the communication devices and media is very important. In 1979 Iran Revolution, audio cassettes which were used to spread the voice and the ideas of Khomeini have had a great importance. Thousands of audio cassettes were distributed to Iranians and listened at their homes. They also used at mosques and public spaces. Also in 1989, in China, fax machines were used at the organization of social movements. In Poland, video cassettes played an important role. Today internet became an important mass medium for the organization of social movements.

As “mass-self communication” medium, internet gives its users an opportunity to spread their thoughts and opinions about everything. As a citizen journalism activity, they can share videos, photographs and texts via social networks, blogs and sites such as YouTube. They can also indicate corruption in politics, police brutality, and oppression of the state or governments by spreading those materials. For instance in Tunisia, the documents about corruption of the Ben Ali regime was revealed by Wikileaks, and the protests started with the self-immolation of a street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi. A number of young people killed themselves before him but Bouazizi’s self-immolation was important and lit the fire of the social movements in Tunisia because it was recorded and broadcasted on YouTube. The impact of the social media technologies has critical importance in organization, communication and mobilization of the masses. According to Nahed Eltantawy and Julie B. Wiest (2011) “social media technologies have been used especially in organizing and implementing collective activities, promoting a sense of community and collective identity among marginalized group members, establishing connections with other social movements, and publicizing causes to gain support from the global community”. In many countries, governments have also seen those effects of social media and shut down many sites in order to prevent the communication between the individuals.

December 17, 2010 became the starting point of the revolts which is known as the Arab Spring. The other Arab countries followed the Tunisian example and it created hope for change that will come from peaceful protests. “The connection between free communication on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter and the occupation of urban space created a hybrid public space of freedom that became a major feature of the Tunisian rebellion, foreshadowing the movements to come in other countries.” says Manuel Castells and indicates the role of social media in Arab revolts (Castells, 2012). As I have mentioned before, especially the young generation was frustrated with unemployment, wanted to get rid of from the corrupt political system and they were missing the social and political equality and freedom in their countries. Social media became a catalyst for spreading their opinions about those subjects. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the blogs were easy to use for the young generation and provide a freedom area which governments could not control easily.

With the birth of the first republic in Tunisia in 1956, President Habib Bourgiba gained control over the press and over broadcasting. Under the leadership of the President, media became a propaganda tool of the government. When Ben Ali came to power the relationship between media and government got even worse. The state TV promoted the image of the president as a successful and progressive leader. (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/01/2011116142317498666.html>)

Social media users took over the role of the journalist in those countries where mainstream media and newspapers could not inform the citizens about the protests and the corruption of the governments. The protesters filmed themselves, and also the police brutality, broadcasted those images via internet and with the words of Castells, this created the “networks of outrage and hope”. The more protesters joined the protests; fear vanished and turned into hope and courage. The effort of the young social media users in Arab countries also gets the attention of the international media and the audience started to follow the news about their countries via international satellite channels such as Al Jazeera which gives more reliable information about the events. The protesters were using not only Arabic but also English and French on their posts that they share on Twitter and Facebook walls in order to attract the attention of the international media and public. But the reliability of those channels and information gathered from the social media must be questioned.

Samir Amin states that the young generation who was using social media effectively (approximately one million protesters) took the leadership of the protests in Egypt. Radical leftist groups and the democrat middle class and after them the Muslim Brotherhood joined those young people and created a huge mass of 15 million protesters. Most of the young bloggers were coming from wealthy classes and they were mostly affected from the American culture. Although they were under the effect of this culture, they were also known as the opponents of the Mubarak regime which was supported by America. According to Samir Amin, CIA was trying to manipulate the Egyptian revolution such as they manipulated the Eastern Europe’s “colorful revolutions” by using the young bloggers (Amin, 2011). One way or another the revolution was started in Egypt and in the Middle East. Therefore Obama and Hillary Clinton realized that they should abandon and sacrifice the Mubarak regime, which was seen as the loyal ally of Israel and US, but also they should control the revolution in order to keep on controlling Egypt and Middle East. Those bloggers whether they were aware of that conspiracy of CIA or not, always have the potential to be used by those manipulators. As I have mentioned before, while those kinds of manipulations were actively done by various powers, we could not be sure about the reliability of the information that was spread through the social media.

While Tunisia’s Ben Ali and Egypt’s Mubarak regimes became more and more authoritarian, some pockets of opposition began to emerge. In Egypt, the independent labor movement organized more than 1900 labor actions of various sizes from 2004 to 2008 that protested the economic and working conditions of the workers. Although opposition parties and media were silenced by the Mubarak regime, Muslim Brotherhood was still an important opposition in Egypt. Along with those actions, the young generation with internet connection started to be active in Egyptian politics. “The 25 January Revolution (*Thawrat 25 Yanayir*) which in 18 days dethroned the last Pharaoh, arose from the depth of oppression, injustice, poverty, unemployment, sexism, mockery of democracy, and police brutality” (Castells, 2012) says Manuel Castells. There was a general unrest in the country primarily because of the economic conditions which led to the workers’ struggles and naturally to the bloody repression of the regime in response. Those struggles gave birth to the 6 April Youth Movement in Egypt in 2008. They created a Facebook group attracting 70.000 followers in the eve of the uprisings.

Luis Fernando Baron defines the five phases of April 6th Youth Movement. According to Baron (2012) in the first phase of the movement (January-June 2008) Facebook and text messages via mobile phones served as tools to spread messages of solidarity. They were also used to encourage individual expression of ideas and to create spaces for political debate, especially among young people. Facebook and mobile phone users were privileged but protesters not having those opportunities also used other media such as leaflets, banners and word of mouth.

In the second phase (July 2008-July 2009), April 6th Facebook Group became a political movement and this “Facebook activism” evaluated as a “dangerous organization” by the regime. Security forces imprisoned and tortured Israa Abdel Fattah and Ahmed Maher because of their key role in the movement. Social media was used to report the events and for social mobilization. Facebook also played an important role in organizing the protests and became a key reference platform for April 6th Youth Movement. In the third phase (August 2010 – May 2010), the protests and social discontent with the regime began to grow. As Abdoun (2008) states, Facebook was started out as a forum to catch up with friends and sharing photos, but after 2008 it was transformed into a political arena. “The users of Facebook have turned the popular entertainment website into a platform for political activism”. Social media became a tool for threatening the oppressive regimes.

In the fourth phase (June 2010-December 2010), feelings of frustration and fear among the protesters started to transform to anger and hope. Police brutality in general and a specific event, assassination of Khaled Said by the police forces, triggered those feelings and accelerated the movement. After this event a Facebook group, “We are all Khaled Said”, was created by Wael Ghonim and Abdulrahman Mansour and ten thousands of Egyptians joined to this group. That group and the others called for supporters on Facebook to demonstrate in front of the Ministry of Interior to protest against the police brutality. They chose January 25 for protests because it was National Police Day (Castells, 2012). According to Baron, Facebook was very important in building a common narrative about police brutality, but it also became a venue of convergence for multiple political-opposition organizations. Twitter had a significant role in the dissemination of news and organization details of protests (Baron, 2012).

The fifth and the last phase is the occupation of the Tahrir (Liberation) Square in Cairo. Tahrir became the visible public space of the revolution. The space of resistance was moved from internet to the square and streets. Individuals, who started a different kind of resistance from their homes, became masses with common interests in Tahrir. The protesters were ready for a revolution because they have already seen the police brutality from Youtube and Facebook and the protesters were provided with materials which made them angry.

One of the founders of the 6 April Youth Movement, Asmaa Mahfooz’s vlog had an refreshing effect on protests. This Vlog came to be known throughout Middle East as “The Vlog that Helped Spark the Revolution”. In her Vlog she tried to wake up the people of Egypt with those words:

“Four Egyptians set themselves on fire... People, have some shame! I, a girl, posted that I will go down to Tahrir Square to

stand alone and I'll hold the banner... I am making this video to give you a simple message: we are going to Tahrir on January 25th... If you stay home, you deserve all that's being done to you, and you will be guilty before your nation and your people. Go down to the street, send SMS's, post it on the Net, make people aware." (Castells, 2012).

With the effect of this Vlog which was directed to the dignity of the Egyptian society, spark the revolution. The bravery of a 26 year-old girl became a symbol of honor and struggle in Egypt. Someone uploaded the video to YouTube and this Vlog spread through the social networks very fast. Fan internet networks of soccer teams al-Ahly and Zamalek Sporting were also important because they had a long history of battling the police. We can also see this leading effect of soccer clubs in Turkish case, Gezi Park Protests.

Before Arab Spring we have seen the "Twitter Revolutions" in Iran and Moldova. Although Iran has strict rules about social media, in Presidential Elections even Ahmedinejad and his rivals used Facebook and blogs. Bloggers became advisers to candidates. According to Hamid Tehrani, in Iran they have "governmental NGO's" and in the future they will probably have "state-run citizen media" (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2011). However, we can see some Facebook pages such as "I bet I can find one million people who dislike Ahmedinejad". After the 2009 elections, Facebook and Twitter was used for protests. Many Iranians on Facebook changed their profile picture to a green square that included the text "where is my vote?" and Facebook turned green. Iranians who got angry with the election results used the chat option of Facebook and also used Twitter effectively in order to communicate with each other about the subject. Ari Berman indicates Twitter's role in citizen journalism act with those words: "Forget CNN or any of the major American news networks. If you want to get the latest on the opposition protests in Iran, you should be reading blogs, watching YouTube or following Twitter updates from Tehran, minute-by-minute". Although Facebook and Twitter were closed down by the authorities, the "real" action remained on Iranian streets and rooftops (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2011).

Also in Egypt where benefits of internet technology were used by protesters, state's response to the internet facilitated revolution was naturally the Great Disconnection. As I have mentioned before, although Mubarak regime tried everything to prevent the connection between individuals, revolution was never incommunicable because its communication platforms were multimodal. Al Jazeera and satellite connection kept the movement informed. By using networks such as HotSpot Shield, Egyptians could access proxies. Protesters found many ways to communicate with each other via internet.

According to the 2011 Arab Social Media Report, 94% of Tunisians and 88% of Egyptians get their news from social media tools. In Egypt alone, there were 6,586,280 active Facebook users in 2011. The largest percentage of Egyptian Facebook users are between the ages of 18 and 24 years old (41%). On Twitter, 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). There are an estimated 131,204 Twitter users in Egypt between 1 January and 30 March 2011 (Storck, 2011). By evaluating those results we can easily

understand that the citizens of Arab countries relied to social media tools, where oppressor governments are in power and where mainstream media is under control of those governments.

Conclusion

Social media was actively used in the social movements in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey. In Occupy Wall Street events the role of social media was also important. We can see that trust to the mainstream media is vanished especially among the young generation. A new kind of journalism, citizen journalism or social media journalism has emerged. Although the main problem is the absence of gatekeeping process in this kind of journalism, the young citizens rely to that news more than the news gathered from the mainstream media since they know the governments and the media moguls censored the information flow.

Another point to indicate is the mobilizing role of the social media. By sharing common fears, difficulties and interests via social media, individuals started to change their minds and fear, outrage and despair vanished and turned to hope. At this point desperate people started to believe for change since they became aware that they are not alone. Feeling of isolation disappears while they were communicating with each other and virtual communities on social networks became “real masses” on streets and squares. Those movements were also spontaneous and leaderless. The main actor of those movements was the young generation who can use the internet technology effectively.

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