Social Media and the Arab Spring

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This paper discusses the effect of social media on the occurrence of 'Arab Spring'. In the Arab world no country could claim to be truly democratic and most were autocratic coupled with desertification (68.4 per cent of the total land area), phenomenal rise in population and scarcity of water. Moreover, about 60 per cent of the population is under 25 years and this group belonging to lower- middle class with high education, self- constructed status, wider world views and global dreams forced them to raise their voice and change the autocratic set up. But, in the absence of effective social media since the year 2000 made it possible to raise their voice unitedly through facebook, twitter and blogs culminating to the ouster of Hosne Mubarak in Egypt. The 'top to down' approach adopted by the Western social scientists, thus proved wrong and 'bottom to top' approach through social media brought the dramatic changes in Arab nations.

Keywords: Social media, Arab Spring, Egypt, convergence, blogosphere, Internet activism, desertification

Social media in the Arab countries prior to the revolutions that are collectively called the "Arab Spring" was considered a insignificant, elitist and selective because of the low penetration and access to the internet. The year 2011 changed that perception. The events that occurred across the Arab World in this year brought 'social media' to the vanguard, with the credit of making possible the revolutions that have taken place going all the way to You Tube, Facebook, Weblogs and Twitter. However, it would be an exaggeration if social media takes away all the acclaim as the driving force behind the Arab Spring.

The convergence of social media, the mainstream media, and mobilization of the masses along with hard core agitations led to the revolution in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. Development communication scholars had always hailed the introduction and spread of social media in the Arab world. They stressed that the social media would allow the people of the region not only to have access to alternative and independent news information, but also to gradually increase the pressure for democratization and liberal reforms (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003; Lynch, 2006). However, they never imagined that the social media would play an instrumental and protagonist role in the overthrow of authoritarian regimes. The technology of social media and blogging, it was felt, was unlikely to 'induce wide political change in the Middle East' (Lynch, 2007).

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By the beginning of 2011, however, the social media acted as an 'accelerating agent' (Chebib & Sohail, 2011), that helped the revolutionaries protesters hold online debates, discussions and arouse the angst of the people against authoritarian regimes. This in turn, led to a widespread fire of agitation that led to the resignation of two unpopular leaders, rapid spread of the people's movement across Arab countries, and trans -nationalization to the wider world.

The cynical approach towards the social media prior to the events of 2011 was due to a 'top-down' view that most analysts assumed while trying to explain the authoritarianism of the Arab regimes. This analysis did not sufficiently investigate the changing political and social dynamics of the Arab world and, therefore, failed to appreciate the importance the social media could have in political communication and mobilization (Gause, 2011).

To understand the phenomenon of "Arab Spring" in general with Egypt as a special case we need to adopt a "bottom to top" approach. The widespread revolt had two major players: the civil society and the social media.

Socio-Political and Economic Intricacies

The world has witnessed tsunami of democracy sweep in different places across the globe. The breaking of the Berlin Wall, communism giving way to democracy in Eastern Europe, the end of monarchy in Nepal are few instances where the tsunami of democracy transformed the system forever. In the year 2011, a wave was sweeping discreetly into a region that had remained devoid of democracy: the Middle East.

The popular uprisings in Arab world took many western analysts and Arab elites by surprise - a surprise that was justified, given the conspicuous silence of the Arab media towards the suppression of political dissent, human rights abuses and earlier emergent protests (Hafez, 2008). When Clad (2011), over examined the factors that explain the stability of authoritarian regimes (i.e. limited electoral campaigns, market reforms, diplomatic relations with major Western countries) western observers and Arab elites failed to appreciate how the dissent of diverse constituencies who possess few institutional channels to express their discontent, may find ways to express their demands through novel means of political mobilization and communication.

The cold war era was a period of gate keeping and secrecy. But even till today, Gulf countries have not permitted free flow of information. Human rights and democratic elections are merely eyewash in many countries of this region.

The Arab society is generally Muslim predominant in all aspects of life. Kaldor (2011) says, "governments and analysts perceived civil society as a solely Western privilege and phenomenon in general, while the Arab region was attached to 'Islamic Exceptionalism". "But the demonstrations and uprisings of 2011, with Muslims and Christians standing together (Bayat , 2011a, b), proved that civil society not only exists in the region, but it is also a significant actor, with no cultural limitations and monopolies on human values. This was the foremost rationale behind the element of astonishment that besieged the West when the 'Arab Spring' occurred. One and all were studying the behavior of governments rather than societies in the region, so they were surprised.

The "top to down" approach focuses on political parties, large scale movements and larger than life leaders as agents of a change. The propagators of this approach did not understand the precariousness of people, movements, cultures, and social constitution in the Arab world. Western social scientists erroneously concluded that movements of 'civil society' did not exist in the Arab world, as movements need to be hierarchically organized, with recognized leaders and resources, an unrelenting assertion of rights and holding street marches, public meetings, demonstrations, and media statements. They ignored the working poor and oppressed sections of the society like youth and women. Ultimately, these classes of the society were the drivers of the political and social change. Religious barriers were broken and people united for a common cause.

However, the people at the bottom end of the society indulged in collective actions unknowingly, they had the same desires but never shared them and their problems which were never solved had brought them unknowingly on a common platform. Thus, we need to adopt the "bottom to top" approach to clearly understand the reasons behind the "Arab Spring."

In the Arab world, no country can claim to be truly democratic, most are autocratic. Authoritarian states have flawed constitutions and whimsical laws, which often suppress the rights of their citizens. The formation of political parties is either prohibited or strict restrictions are in place on the functioning of opposition parties. The freedom of speech and expression is controlled. The same goes for civil society associations, which face restrictions and censorship on their development. The violations of citizens' rights to life and freedom are committed through the malpractices of inhuman torture and illegal detention. Between 2006 and 2008, the Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR) found examples of the official practice of torture in eight Arab states. In the same period, the AOHR reported on the more widespread practice of illegal detention in eleven countries across the region (Arab Human Development Report (AHDR, 2009, p. 8).

Environmental challenges are also being faced by the Arab countries. Desertification is an imminent threat. The desert covers more than two-thirds of the total land area of the region (9.76 million square kilometers of desert, or 68.4 per cent of the total land area). Desertification threatens about 2.87 million square kilometers or a fifth of the total area of the Arab countries (AHDR, 2009, p.5). According to UN estimates, the Arab countries will be home to some 395 million people by 2015 (compared to about 317 million in 2007, and 150 million in 1980). In a region where water and cultivable land are shrinking, population growth at these rates creates intense pressures under conditions of volatile growth, high unemployment and persisting poverty (AHDR, 2009, p. 4).

On the economic front, the oil driven growth has created weak structural foundations in Arab economies. Many Arab countries are turning into increasingly import-oriented and service-based economies. The types of services found in most Arab countries fall at the low end of the value-adding chain, contribute little to local knowledge development and lock countries into inferior positions in global markets. This trend has grown at the expense of Arab agriculture, manufacturing and industrial production. Overall, the Arab countries were less industrialized in 2007 than in 1970 (AHDR, 2009, pp.11-12).

Unemployment is also on the rise in most Arab countries. The exposure to the west through media, internet and education has given a flip to the dreams and aspirations of the Arab youth. Hollywood emerged as a window which brought in western air to their homes. Young people are the fastest growing segment of Arab countries populations. Some 60 per cent of the population is under 25 years old, making this one of the most youthful regions in the world, with a median age of 22 years compared to a global average of 28 (AHDR, 2009, p.5).

To make things worse, the majority of these young girls and boys constitute 'the 'middle-class poor' with high education, self-constructed status, wider world views, and global dreams who nonetheless are compelled, by unemployment and poverty, to subsist on the margins as casual, low-paid, low-status, and low-skilled workers (as street vendors, sales persons, boss boys, or taxi drivers), and to reside in the overcrowded slums and squatter settlements of the Arab cities' (Bayat, 2011b).

To add to this, about 20.3 per cent of the Arab population is living below the two-dollars a day international poverty line. About 34.6 million Arabs are living in extreme poverty, ranging from a low 28.6 to 30 per cent in Lebanon and Syria to a high 41 per cent in Egypt and 59.5 per cent in Yemen (AHDR, 2009, pp. 13-14). Devoid of any democratic set up to air their grievances, new forms of media and communication technology became the arena for the expression of discontent. Social media which includes Facebook, YouTube, Weblogs, Twitter etc emerged as the platforms of free expression and discussion. Moreover, social media was away from the preying eyes of the Arab regimes. Finally, the internet and social media were the powerful tools for mobilization and assertion, paving the way for the uprisings of 2011.

Internet Activism and its Political Uses

According to Vegh (2003), internet activism is 'a politically motivated movement relying on the internet' using strategies that are either internet-enhanced or internet-based. We can further classify internet activism into three categories: The first is awareness and advocacy-which is to use the internet as an alternative news source to offset the information channels opposed to the interests of the activists. The second category includes 'mediated mobilization'. This form of internet activism usually arouses people for 'offline' action, such as demonstrations and protests, as witnessed in Egypt. Finally, action/reaction activism-often dubbed 'Hacktivism'is used to describe malicious attacks by activists to bring down or paralyze websites (Lievrouw, 2011).

Web 2.0 was a key tool for mobilization and communication, which describes an umbrella of social media available on the internet, including blogs, photo and file sharing systems, and social networking sites. Although these are largely meant for personal purposes and building relationships, political maneuvering and action also take place. For example, in postings protesting government actions on YouTube, or in utilization of still image and video functionalities on mobile phones during demonstrations and police confrontations (Aday & Livingston, 2008; Vasi, 2006; Carty & Onyett, 2006; Clark &Themudo, 2006).

This is the case because Web 2.0 is a highly scalable, accessible and cheap technology, which enables individuals not only to communicate with groups of other individuals,

but also to influence groups of other individuals as they share ideas, activities, events and interests within their networks (Blossom, 2007).

According to the 'communication power' theory, these wireless communication networks and networks of trust evolve into networks of resistance, 'which prompts mobilization against an identified target' (Castells, 2009). Castells' model of communication power through wireless communication is visible in the background of the internet activism in the Egyptian uprisings. For example, a mobile phone user would spread information to people in his contact list, a Facebook or a Twitter user's created content is spread to all 'friends' or 'followers', who can then choose to comment on it or forward it or even ignore or report. This allows the creation of networks of trust and, in the Egyptian case, the nurturing of a network of resistance against Hosni Mubarak. We need to carefully observe the impact of online insurgent politics of the internet activists that got multiplied through communication power to create the popular base for protest in the offline world.

In fact, and according to research conducted by the Arab Social Media Report (Shalem & Mourtada, 2011a), by the end of 2010 the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world stood at 21, 361, 83 million, up from 11,978,300 in January 2010 (a 78 per cent annual growth rate). Egypt, with around 4.7 million Facebook users, constituted, by the end of 2010, 22 per cent of total users in the Arab region; followed by Saudi Arabia (15 per cent, 3,213,420); Morocco (11 per cent, 2,446,300); United Arab Emirates (10 per cent, 2,135,960); Tunisia (8 per cent, 1,820,880) and Algeria (7 per cent, 1,413,280). In addition, by the end of 2010, the Arab region also had 40,000 active blogs (Ghannam, 2011). And all this in a region where youth between the ages of 15 and 29 not only make up around one third of the population, but also 75 per cent of Facebook users.

Internet led to creation of a 'bottom to top' movement. Information flow was well balanced and widespread. The movement was leaderless but unknowingly had evolved with a common ideology. Social media and blogosphere were the new instruments of liberation against the autocratic Arab regimes. A study on the Arab blogosphere found that at the beginning of 2009, criticism of domestic leaders topped the list of political topics discussed (Etling, 2009). In addition, the innovative uses by bloggers of the new digital media to organize protests and publicize state-sponsored abuses, also revealed that a 'significant youth contingent was becoming politicized and increasingly adept at using blogs and social media to challenge the status quo' (Radsch, 2011).

Therefore, it can be concluded that prior to the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, the social media had played their part in communicating, coordinating and channeling the rising tide of change from below. With the majority of the population of the Arab world under the age of 30 and tech-savvy, proficient at using the latest means of communication, they were able to hoodwink state censorship and mobilize for a common cause. A potent means of coordinating and communicating mass protests was in their hands now (mobile phone).

Keeping that in mind, let us examine how the social media during the Egyptian uprising empowered a 'leaderless network', mobilized public mobilization and created a strong civil society. Moreover, the collaboration between activists at regional and global level helped the 'Arab Spring' gain attention of the entire world.

Prelude to Uprising in Egypt

The brutal murder of 28-year-old Khaled said at the hands of Egyptian police in Alexandria in June 2010 can be called as the beginning to the end of the Hosni Mubarak rule in Egypt. His death became a *cause célèbre* for internet activists. The official word on his death that he died of choking was unacceptable to the public. Pictures of Said's severely beaten corpse published by the blogger Zeinobia showed his skull and jaw with clear fractures that left the police claim that he had died of asphyxiation untenable (Zeinobia, 2010). One thousand people attended Said's funeral in Alexandria, while activists protested outside of the Interior Ministry's offices in Cairo (Al Amrani, 2010).

Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian working with Google established a Facebook 'group' open for all Facebook members and started a campaign against police brutality. Thus, leading to an online mobilization that ultimately led to the demonstrations in Cairo on 25 January 2011 and, eventually, Mubarak's ouster. The group's name in Arabic, *Kulina Khalid Said* ('We Are All Khaled Said' WAAKS) expressed the sentiment perfectly, and soon caught the sentiments of online community. He filled the site with video clips and newspaper articles about police violence. The distortions of the official media were exposed through facebook. He attracted users in huge numbers and created a forum for an online democratic participation. When organizers planned a 'day of silence' in the Cairo streets, for example, he polled users on what colour shirts they should all wear, black or white (Kirkpatrick and Sanger, 2011). By the end of 2010, the page had more than 500,000 fans, providing, one might argue, a means for ordinary people to connect with human rights advocates, while also trying to amass support against police abuse, torture and the way in which the Mubarak government permanent emergency laws allowed people to be jailed without charges (Preston, 2011).

Before the WAAKS movement, the year 2008 saw a series of labour strikes in Egypt. In 2008, two young activists created a Facebook page, the 'April 6 Facebook Strike', calling for a general strike to support the workers in the Nile Delta city Mahalla. Despite the fact that internet penetration in Egypt was low at that time, still, the page attracted 70,000 participants in just two weeks. The strike in Mahalla, turned violent when government fired on the protesters. Bloggers posted pictures of crowds tearing down posters of Mubarak and stepping on them, which spread through the blogosphere. One such post on *Manalaa.net* drew more than 40,000 views (Radsch, 2011; Faris, 2008).

Through such diffuse and horizontal actions, opponents of authoritarian regimes, felt that their views where widely shared and that enough of their fellow citizens where willing to join them (Khanis & Vaughn, 2011). The social media helped in spreading information like a wildfire and made people feel part of a common cause. A deep sense of unity and brotherhood was forged between the people.

Social Media and Uprising in Egypt

The overthrow of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011 incited the people of Egypt as well. The Egyptian revolution, began with the 'Day of Anger' (25 January 2011) With the images of Mohammed Bouaziz setting fire to himself in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, posted on YouTube and Facebook, protesters in Egypt started organizing in small groups, went door to door passing out flyers that told people to attend the

protests, posted on Facebook pages Twitter. YouTube videos were used to arouse the people against the atrocities committed by the autocratic regime in Egypt. SMS were sent where people didn't have access to the internet. They even dialed random numbers in the hopes that the exhortations to demonstrate would fall on sympathetic ears (Baker, 2011). In addition, the Facebook page of Khaled said not only became a focal point for the dissemination of popular protest throughout Egypt, but also scaled vertically through key Facebook sites overcoming the relatively limited penetration of social media (Mainwaring, 2011).

With a penetration rate of 5.5 per cent, but a large population which translated into around 6 million Facebook users, a core number of activists were able to connect to a much larger number of social contacts who could be influenced by information from those with Facebook accounts (Salem and Mourtada, 2011b). As a result, the common people came out on the Tahrir Square for the 'March of the Millions' (1 February), which forced President Hosni Mubarak's to leave. Facebook pages, such as the 'We are all Khaled Said', were used as a means to provide information to the protesters, press management, and creating awareness of civil society on the demands and action taken by the activists. Images were also posted showing satellite maps marked with arrows indicating where protesters could go to avoid pro-government forces. Google maps and gathering points were posted to the activists, guiding them and boosting their morale by posting successful activities from other places and enhancing the feeling of unity. Mobile phones were used for private communication that couldn't be detected by the State. The mobile cameras came in handy to capture images and videos.

Egyptians in Tahrir Square ranged from young, well-educated students to doctors, lawyers, judges, workers and the unemployed. People cutting across age group and religion were united in this struggle. During the Internet blackout, Google and Twitter offered the 'Speak-2-Tweet', a service where users could call an international telephone number to post and hear Twitter messages without the internet. The 'Small World News' project "Alive" partnered with 'Speak-2-Tweet' to translate voice messages from protesters at Tahrir Square carried on the momentum of the protest ,despite an internet blackout by the regime. Some recordings appeared on the 'Speak-2-Tweet' Twitter account from Egyptians who learned about the service during the blackout, possibly via phone calls with friends and family outside of Egypt (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

Non-government organizations worked in tandem with the activists to provide all kinds of support in terms of infrastructure and training. European social movements advised them how to use "ghost servers" in order to confuse the online monitoring of the government (Reissmann & Rosenbach, 2011).

'Global Voices' from Tunisia and the 'Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights' helped by using mobile phones and Twitter to share information about arrested activists. United States based non-governmental organizations imparted skills on video reporting and media management, mapping tools, choosing the best locations for photographing the demonstrations. The human rights organization 'Witness' taught them about camera operations and the use of audio recording devices, and the Kenyan NGO 'Ushahidi' built their online capabilities for reporting securely with mobile phones and building online content around it (Ishani, 2011).

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The majority (almost 60 per cent) of Facebook users, also felt that the main impact of Mubarak blocking the Internet was positive for the uprising, spurring people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organizing (Salem & Mourtada, 2011b).

Participatory journalism arose with citizens donning the role of a journalist. These citizen journalists sent latest news and time to time updates from the streets of Cairo to the mainstream media. Finally, the Hosni Mubarak rule ended in Egypt.

Conclusion

In the Arab world, social media and internet became the tools of a historic change. The use of social networking sites went beyond entertainment and communication. It was used as a medium of expression, channel for communication with masses and most important feedback. However social media and internet cannot be given the sole credit for the uprising. The people's angst with the autocratic rule, oppression, rising unemployment along with exposure to the western lifestyle were other factors that were instrumental in creating a movement that caused a stir in Egypt.

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