

Michael Sobrepera

Brunson

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Social Media: The Real Impact on the Arab Spring and Green Revolution

Over the past few years, the world has seen significant revolutionary movements in the Middle East and North Africa (for simplicity, 'Middle East' will be used to refer to both). In 2009, the world watched as the Green Revolution took place in Iran, and more recently, beginning at the end of 2010 and picking up in the spring of 2011, there have been revolutionary movements throughout the Arab world in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, and other countries. Throughout these uprisings, many have pointed to social media as the cause of the movements, their driving force, and the reason why the uprisings succeeded to the extent which they did saying that the revolutions would have been impossible without social media. Some go so far as to suggest that social media organically organized the protests without the need for leaders. Reality is not so extolling of the value of social media. Social media did undoubtedly play a role in the protests as a worldwide publicity tool, but it was certainly not the driving force behind them nor the primary method of organizing them.

The first of the revolutions credited to social media to occur in the region was in Iran. In 2009, the world watched as Hoessein Mousavi, a very powerful opposition figure, rose in Iran to oppose then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Initial indicators showed that Mr. Mousavi was going to be a serious challenger to President Ahmadinejad in the election. However, President Ahmadinejad was at the time very loyal to the ruling clerics in Iran and held their support. After the election, the government announced that President Ahmadinejad had won the vote only a few

hours after polls closed, impossibly soon for a proper count to have been performed. This was not unanticipated by the opposition, nor by the international community, and in reaction to what was believed to be a rigged vote, Mr. Mousavi called for his supporters to take to the streets in protest. In this uprising there was a clear leader, Mr. Mousavi. There was clearly no self-forming Twitter Revolution, as some people claimed there was (Morozov, 'Iran: Downside'). However at the same time, there was a massive amount of data coming out of Iran talking about the revolutions. There were tweets about where people were meeting, YouTube videos of police brutality and of the general mass of the crowds, and blog postings about everything involved. But as Jina Moore points out, most of these postings were after the fact, describing what was happening, not driving it. Even more importantly, a large number of the people using the micro-blogging site Twitter (the revolution was called 'The Twitter Revolution' by some) were not in Iran. A large portion of the tweeters were in fact Iranian ex-patriots. In addition a massive amount of the tweets, even the ones from Iran, were in English rather than Farsi (Gladwell). This should not however be taken to mean that social media did not play a role. These videos and messages flying around the digital world carried some serious power. This was particularly true of a video of a young Iranian girl, Neda, being shot by a government sniper and dying in her father's arms in the middle of the street at a protest. Within hours, Neda's face was on posters around the world and hundreds of thousands of people globally joined behind the Green Revolution.

In Egypt the revolutions were initially organized by a central group, who acted in a manner consistent with actions of the leaders of prior revolutions, even going into hiding just prior to the start of the protests, as is the norm for revolutionary leaders (Evgeny, 'Facebook and Twitter: Places Revolutionaries Go'). But did these leaders succeed just as a result of social

media usage? Well it would not make much sense for that to be the case, as Todd Gitlin points out: prior to and during the revolutions the number of people in Egypt using Facebook was in the single digits. So although there were numerous groups on Facebook purporting to be organizing for the Egyptian uprisings, who were their audiences? After the uprisings began though, did social media take over as the organizing tool creating an organic society of dissidents who moved based on what each other tweeted? It would seem not. An iconic image from Tahrir Square is of a small group of bloggers under a canopy blogging together from the square. However they were not blogging to other Egyptians, but rather to people in the western world. And this highlights the true value of social media within the revolutions.

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs indisputably allowed protestors to distribute information about what was happening to the western world. In many of these Arab countries the western news media services are not able to report freely. Social media users in these countries had however learned to broadcast around the roadblocks which exist for traditional media. Most Arab users of western social media who speak English (the people who provided information for the western media) are, as Morozov Evgeny points out, by their nature western leaning and therefore in favor of the revolutions ('Downside to Twitter'). The ability of western societies to see what was happening, specifically from the perspective of these revolutionaries, led to pressure being put on western leadership to take a stance on the revolutions in favor of the revolutionaries.

For the Green Revolution in Iran this meant nothing. The United States and her allies have no real power over Iran, so in Iran the government dealt with the protestors violently, and although the Green Movement still exists it no longer fields large protests as it did in 2009 and 2010. However in a country such as Egypt where the United States and her allies have actively

supported the regime for years, the United States' support of the revolutionaries had a massive impact on forcing the death of the old government. The ability of the west to see what was going on in the streets in near real time prevented the government from overtly, violently putting down the revolution. Subsequently, in Libya, governments were pressured to provide a no-fly zone and ground support for the rebels, at least partly as a result of the western public being able to see what was occurring on the ground. And really this had to have been the goal of Libyan bloggers and social media users, as the vast majority of Libyans do not have internet access (Evgeny, 'Spinternet'). So clearly the goal of the social media users was to project their message to the west.

In addition to looking at what actually happened in the Arab world over the past few years, one can also take a much more theoretical perspective on the revolutions. When looking at past social movements which involved significant risk, for example the American civil rights movement or the protests in east Germany, it can always be seen that there were personal connections which led people to stand up to impossible odds to take down those who were oppressing them. As Malcom Gladwell points out, during the civil rights movement, the original four students that sat down at Woolworth's counter in Greensboro were all friends, and the men and women that protested in East Germany were broken up into small groups of people who knew each other. In the Arab world, as in the southern United States during the Civil Rights movement, and East Germany, during the Cold War, dissent could lead to injury or death. People are willing to go into dangerous situations with people they trust. This is why every successful military emphasizes a sense of extreme comradery amongst its soldiers. Social media platforms do not promote this level of trust and attachment between users and as such cannot be given too much credit for promoting revolutions in places which can be so hostile, such as the Middle East

where protestors would only have acted in the ways which they did as a result of personal connections, not connections to a digital personality.

In the end, to say that the protests in the Middle East over the past few years were created as a result of social media and that they succeeded to the extent which they did as a result of social media is simply unfair. Certainly social media played an important role. Videos of a man burning himself in protest, crowds being beaten, and a young girl being killed certainly galvanized the public. In the west this led to news coverage and political pressure in favor of the protestors. In the Middle East this led to increases in protest size, encouraging groups on the edge of revolt to take the leap and move into the streets. But were these roles not filled in the past by other means of communication? In the East German protests, did the fax machine and Radio Free Europe not serve to promote revolution and move information in and out of the region? And in the American civil rights movement did churches not serve to spread both the word about what was happening and to organize? In fact in Egypt mosques were used as an organizing force similar to churches in the American Civil Rights Movement. Throngs of people surged out of mosques onto the streets after Friday prayers on multiple pivotal Fridays throughout the protests in Egypt.

So yes, social media played an important role in the protests. However the role which it played had been fulfilled in the past by other forms of media. Realistically social media cannot be credited with the appearance and success of protests over the past few years in the Middle East. Westerners would love to validate the inordinate amount of time which they waste on social media by pointing to how it has helped people half a world away to break free from oppression, but unfortunately for those westerners, there were not 'Twitter Revolutions' but rather people revolutions, in a world which was ready to see them.

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