Lessons from the Arab Spring: Could Social Revolutions Continue to Enforce Political Changes?

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Abstract

The question examined in this research is the ability of social revolutions to enforce political changes, particularly in the Arab World, a decade past the Arab Spring of 2011. The research concentrates on four major lessons that could provide us the opportunity to examine this question. The first lesson relates to the role of new media and online campaigns in determining social changes. The combined impact of technology and social movements changed the way that traditional media and governments operate and created a new type of politics, where the presence of the public is much more apparent through social media. The second lesson relates to the role of social media and social movements in the new political landscape in the Arab World. The combination of technology and social movements became paramount in determining public agenda since information is not a monopoly anymore of the old establishment of governments and traditional media. The third lesson shows that since politics became a dialogue between politicians and the public, political stability cannot be achieved by military and security forces while ignoring the needs and aspirations of the people. This lesson shows us that democratic transition requires structural change of a state apparatus from an authoritarian or autocratic regime to a political government and democratization with initial mobilization to get rid of the old regime. This can be explained in that instability increases as the ability of political institutions to respond effectively to political demands is weakened. The fourth lesson relates to the role of governments in advancing technology. It shows us that the relations between new media and politics are not limited to social movements but rather governments today play an important role in the development of new media. The events of the Arab Spring demonstrate that the role of governments has become crucial for the global and economic development of countries while the digital landscape provides enormous opportunities for governments to engage with new policies involving digital technologies and maintain their influence in local politics and in the global arena.

Key words: *Arab World, Middle East, mainstream media, new media, social revolution*

Introduction

Media-state relations changed fundamentally in the Middle East, as the main forces that determine political issues have changed. For decades, government-sponsored or politically allied media services having a monopoly over the information provided to the public dominated the Arab World, although things changed with the advent of new media and the adoption of social media. The impact of the people is transparent in the new politics of the Middle East, based on two major developments which have collided into a tremendous upheaval in world politics: the social revolutions that took place across the Arab World and the dominance of the Internet in this transformation. As determined by this research and evident in the events that took place in the Arab World, social revolutions are based on economic development that can lead individuals and groups to demand political reforms. Also evident in this research is that Internet use for political purposes increases the likelihood of protest participation and lead to political upheaval.

The protest in the spring of 2011 was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that in the Arab world, mainly Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain (The National, 2011). The uprising was organized by activists which

used the Internet as a dynamic vehicle to maintain broad based support in the streets. The nature of each pro-democracy uprising varied wildly from country to country, but the power of social media was felt across the Middle East and around the world. The term Arab Spring became interchangeable with "Twitter uprising" or "Facebook revolution", as global media tried to make sense of what was going on (Shearlaw, 2016).

Digital, global and social media played a central role in shaping political debates during the Arab Spring and since then throughout the decade (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad, 2019). The impact of these media services was influential in spreading ideas of freedom and democracy to the people, motivating them to take their protests onto the streets, assisting in the planning and organization of demonstrations, communicating with the outside world and contributing to the proliferation of a young generation that had the technical means and social enthusiasm to demand social and political changes. The new media landscape allowed the people to spread news and information regarding the uprisings, as opposed to the traditional reporting via mainstream media outlets that dominated and manipulated the news (for example: Kassim, 2012; Duggan, Maeve and Smith, 2016).

The new media environment in the Middle East is different today from the way traditional media operated (Harrelson, 2016). The supremacy of new technology enforced new standards on the way traditional media operate, significantly transforming their conduct, as global coverage took center stage and social networks provided instant and unlimited information (Leong, 2017). To explore the new media landscape of the Middle East, the study examines the changing environment of the media – the transformation of influence from traditional media to global and social media. The research demonstrates that the political environment is deeply influenced by the counter relations of media and politics. It argues that digital, global and social media transformed the traditional political uses of the old media and expanded the traditional roles of the media even in undemocratic societies that identified the Arab World. As the past decade proved, political independence and the spread of technology brought an immense optimism for new social movements to achieve better living standards, and technology enabled the creation of digital public squares, allowing the public to connect with governments, politicians and social movements.

Analysis

The role of the news media in dealing with political issues is a topic that has received a great deal of scholarly attention, especially in the field of political communication, since the media have a long history of being closely associated with government interests. This is a major issue that emerged with the advent of digital media and the contrast of free media and limitation on freedom of speech. According to Maoz (2006), the news media are a major source of public information on political processes and can be regarded as a crucial tool for mobilizing opinions in political and social issues. This position is supported by Wolsfeld (2017), who argues that the media doesn't initiate policies but intensifies them. Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2008) found that the mainstream press – in tune with political elites and public opinion – largely support political decisions of governments. Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015) explain that the media are bias because people are more likely to read news stories that are in line with their own views. According to Murray, Parry, Robinson and Goddard (2008), this can be explained in dependence of the media upon official sources. Wolfsfeld (1997) explains that traditional media was often characterized as behaving like a 'faithful servant' that publicized official frames and ignored or discredited challengers. Thus, political influence is crucial, and research shows that news media organizations rely heavily on official information for the construction of news (Iribarren, 2019).

To examine the changes in the way that the mainstream media operate, we need first to look at the political situation prior to 2011. Arab citizens were kept away from outside world information since the mainstream media were controlled and influenced by governments. The ruling administrations were mostly dominated by military regimes that controlled the region since the end of the colonial era (Frantzman, 2018). The mainstream media were subject to state laws and Arab governments controlled public agenda. But although they maintained tremendous influence through traditional media sources (Shishkina and Issaev, 2018), the Arab population was young and highly educated but with no clear prospects for the future. They turned to the Internet to express their frustrations and dissatisfaction with problems that they faced daily, such as unemployment, tough economic conditions and government corruption, and utilized the Internet to rally the populace to their cause in the protests (Mourtada and Salem, 2012).

On January 25, 2011, Egypt witnessed a popular revolution that led to a historic outcome, as hundreds of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets, demanding freedom, justice and an end to corruption. Their demands were escalated

as they demanded that President Hosni Mubarak would step down after being in power for 30 years. The mass demonstrations started out in Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo and spread throughout Egypt. The impact of the Internet was crucial to determine the turn of event. Despite the small number of Egyptians on Facebook at that time, activists used it to get their message across and to plan their meeting points on the streets. Inspired by the successful revolution in neighboring Tunisia, Egyptian demonstrators called followers to join them in the streets. The organizers created a Facebook event, where they provided detailed instructions about where to go and what to do, and even listed the phone numbers of human rights lawyers who would be on call. This coordination helped to give the events its impressive sense of national scope — with events erupting simultaneously in multiple locations around the country. Twitter too played a key role in mobilizing the Egyptian public. It was helpful for organizing the protest and allowed activists to send live updates about where demonstrators were headed and which areas to avoid. These updates crucially facilitated the spontaneous marches (for example: Ghannam, 2016; Kasim, 2012; Brown, Guskin and Mitchell, 2012).

It is particularly notable that the uprising was escalated after the government cut off access to the Internet: four Internet providers simultaneously went dark and mobile phone service in many areas went down. The move had unintended consequences, after which security forces killed hundreds of people in clashes and the military mobilized amid unrest. Internet blackout lasted for six days, during which the country was totally isolated from the world, although protest organizers were able to bring out larger crowds than ever using flyers and leaflets, word of mouth and mosques as centers for congregation (for example: Howard and Hussain, 2011; Benioff, 2012). Global impact was important since hackers focused on getting information to the Internet by bouncing content to computers in other countries (Shearlaw, 2016). The demonstrations continued and over the course of eighteen days the masses defied a nationwide curfew, until Mubarak had no choice but to step down on February 11, delegating his powers to the military (Lynch, 2011).

Following that, the role of traditional media changed forever, in the Middle East and around the world. It was the first time that people in the Arab World could get a political message out, rally support and to raise awareness among the mass. New media constituted an important and independent cause of the protests to enhance the demonstrators and organize gathering (Saifuddin and Jaeho, 2019). The events had a global impact, as it was the first time that people around the world could see what was truly going on in the Arab World. In conclusion of the events, it became evident that the demonstrations that took place in Egypt and the overall uprisings in the Arab World were motivated by social media (Brown, Gaskon and Mitchell, 2012), which functioned as both a public sphere and a communicative tool (Castells (2012). The results of the social revolutions were that social issues became influential through social media, political regimes collapsed, and the mainstream media lost its monopoly on public agenda. The result of the political and media changes was that a new style of public debate developed, where ordinary people spread news and information, opposing the traditional mainstream media (Hemple, 2016).

Discussion

The question examined in this research is the ability of social revolutions to enforce political changes, particularly in the Arab World, a decade past the Arab Spring. The research concentrates on four major lessons of the Arab Spring, that could provide us the opportunity to examine this question. The first lesson relates to the role of new media and online campaigns in determining social changes. The combined impact of technology and social movements changed the way that traditional media and governments operate and created a new type of politics, where the presence of the public is much more apparent through social media. The second lesson relates to the role of social media and social movements in the new political landscape in the Arab World. The uprisings showed the power of mass demonstrations and peaceful protest and the ability of social media to fuel protest and communicate goals to the outside world. The combination of technology and social movements became paramount in determining public agenda since information was no longer a monopoly of the old establishment of governments and traditional media. The third lesson shows that since politics became a dialogue between politicians and the public, political stability cannot be achieved by military and security forces while ignoring the needs and aspirations of the people. The fourth lesson relates to the new role of governments in advancing technology. It shows that the relations between new media and politics are not limited to social movements but rather governments today play an important role in the development of new media. The digital landscape provides enormous opportunities for governments to engage with new policies involving digital technologies and maintain their influence in local politics and in the global arena.

Lesson 1: the role of new media and online campaigns in determining social changes

The relationship between traditional and new media have become an issue for debate in many political systems following the emergence of technology. The role of the mainstream media as a watchdog remained vital in generating a democratic culture that extends beyond the political system and becomes engrained in the public consciousness (Kumar, 2016), although the growth of new media changed the way in which the mainstream media interact with societies. This is particularly evident as a result of the social revolutions and the political movements that have dominated the Arab World (Mourtada and Salem, 2012). Similarly, the geo-political situation is different today than a decade ago, since the main power players maintain a different position. The main forces behind the new policies are global media, global coverage and new technology - all which changed the way that traditional media and governments operate. Global media and social networks forced changes in the policy of governments and created a new reality of dominance of global issues. The global flow of information proved that cultural distinctions have become less powerful than the free flow of information. As a result, scholars argue that social media functions globally as a public sphere and locally as an organizational tool representing broader political aspirations (for example: Alalawi, 2015; Agarwal, 2016; Manyika and Lund, 2019). According to Kenig (2013), the social movement in the Arab World was a democratic protest that reflected a positive and encouraging development for all those who uphold the values of democracy around the world.

In this environment, digital technology and online campaigns changed Arab politics forever. Social media facilitated both the organization and the spread of the protests, which led to widespread enthusiasm about their role for the mobilization of democratic resistance (Lynch, 2015). The Arab Spring was escalated based on social motives that led to the outbreak of the unrest. It was a rebellion against social issues and the economic situation: rising unemployment and poverty and widening social gaps. The protests were also aimed at political issues: dissatisfaction with the government's dictatorial style, widespread corruption and violations of basic human rights. These social, economic and political issues were intensified by demographic changes and the impact of technology, since standards of living increased in many Arab countries and many citizens acquired higher education and could connect to the world via the Internet and social networks. Public information that was supplied on social networks and Internet websites by ordinary citizens played an important role and successfully bypassed the traditional media and the old political establishment. Being capable to share an immense amount of uncensored information contributed to the cause of many activists, who could organize offline protests through Facebook and Twitter. Social networks successfully broke the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information, providing activists with an opportunity to quickly disseminate information while bypassing government restrictions (for example: Wiest and Eltantawy, 2011; Kasim, 2012).

Lesson 2: the role of social media and social movements in the new political landscape

As demonstrated by the events investigated in this research, social media and social movements changed the political landscape in the Arab World. New media played a key role in mobilizing the uprising, contributing to social polarization, popular discontent and the resurgence of old regimes. With new media, public agenda changed as information became unfiltered and not censored (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). New media increased the role of the public, who could influence political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse. Young and politically aware citizens set a promising political map for the region (Tung, 2011), using social media which became embedded in the culture of the young Arabs. In covering the events that started on Facebook or Twitter, global media focused heavily on young protesters with smartphones mobilizing in the streets in political opposition (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad, 2019). The importance of social and global media was in communicating to the rest of the world, as Twitter and Facebook data informed international audiences and mainstream media reporting (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides and Freelon, 2012).

The role of the Internet in the Arab Spring demonstrates the impact of technology and social movements on politics (Bessinger, 2017). It also provides an evidence to the impact of technology and global media on the media landscape. The revolution provided the initial and most important impact of the Internet on social movements worldwide, and the growth of social media usage changed the ways in which governments interact with societies in the region (Mourtada and Salem, 2012). The demonstrations throughout the Arab World demonstrated that the days of government-sponsored or politically allied newspapers having a media monopoly have been eclipsed by the advent and adoption of social media. Social networks informed, mobilized and created new communities – which were not limited to geographical differences. As explained by Dalacoura (2012), social media increased transparency and allowed ordinary citizens to hold governments accountable. Howard and Hussain (2011} further

explain that new media allowed democratization movements to develop new tactics for catching dictators off guard. The true impact of social networks can be assessed by the number of Facebook users, which increased significantly during the first three months of the Arab Spring, mainly in the countries where protests took place. Twitter usage in the Arab world grew throughout 2011 as well, both in terms of the number of users and the volume of tweets they generated (Mourtada and Salem, 2012). This trend increased since then, with the result that people in the Middle East became the most frequent users of social media, according to a study by the Pew Research Center (2017). The impact of technology grew consistently in the Arab World and the median percentage of social media use was found to be significantly higher than the global average (Massimilliano, Donatella and Sanders, 2018).

Lesson 3: politics became a dialogue between politicians and the public

The relationship between the mass media and politics is commonly known, and political and communication scholars are now highlighting the increasing connection between social media and politics around the world. Research has shown that the main way in which social media shape political conflicts is by inflaming the discourse around it. This is because of the inherent global political and cultural nature of conflicts, although this trend has been utilized by governments in the Middle East. While previously Arab governments argued that state control over the broadcasting system has been necessary to preserve the common Arab cultural heritage as well as to secure national unity and political stability (Rinnawi, 2006), governments today are using social media to rally domestic and foreign support for their policies.

With the changes in the digital media landscape, governments today play an important role in the development of new media. Digital media and social networks provide enormous opportunities and challenges for states and international organizations as they seek to engage with new policy involving digital technologies. With social media, politics became a dialogue between politicians and the public, with new opportunities for individuals and politicians alike. The prevalence of social media in politics made elected officials accessible, as the ability to publish content allows them to communicate with the public directly and at almost no cost.

The new era of politics allows us to see how social media changed the communications between political representatives and the public. A defining characteristic of new media is dialogue which enable people to share, comment on, and discuss a wide variety of topics, grounded on an interactive community (Vogt, 2011). So too, new media favors politicians, which can create a presence on social media platforms to help shape their public perception (Harrelson, 2016). Research shows that social media can influence public's opinion and knowledge about the political discourse (Utz, 2009), since users are much more likely to be involved in the political process than those who are not engaged in sharing Facebook, twitter or videos (Cohen & Kahne, 2011). According to Tumasjan et al (2010), social media is not used only to spread political opinions, but also to discuss these opinions with other users. They argue that social media enriches political forecasting and voter's preferences with resemble traditional election polls.This analysis demonstrates a major lesson that was evident in the social revolutions in the Arab World, that democratic transition requires structural change of a state apparatus from an authoritarian or autocratic regime to a political government.

Another lesson is that democratization requires initial mobilization to get rid of the old regime. This can be explained in that instability increases as the ability of political institutions to respond effectively to political demands is weakened (Al-Serhan, Salameh, Rsheideh and Mashagbeh, 2017). In attempting to answer the question if social revolutions could continue to enforce political changes a decade after the Arab Spring, we can relate to the analysis of the Arab Center Washington DC., that for decades intrastate conflicts dominated the life in the Middle East and North Africa and had devastating effects on Arab society, the uprisings showed the power of mass demonstrations and peaceful protest and the ability of social media to fuel protest and communicate goals to the outside world. Another major lesson from these events is that political stability cannot be achieved by military and security forces while ignoring the needs and aspirations of the people. This conclusion is backed by Political Stability (2017), which explains that countries with a large military force can also face fragile and weak political stability regardless of huge military spending.

Lesson 4: the role of governments in advancing technology

Another major lesson of the events of the Arab Spring is that the role of governments in advancing technology has become crucial for the global and economic development of countries. In the industrial age, the role of governments in technological development and economic growth varied widely based on political and economic ideology and much of the policy was focused on the proper links between trade policy and technology policy. In the information

age policies must change to meet global competition and governments must formulate national strategies for technology creation, acquisition, absorption and dissemination throughout the productive sectors of the economy.

In the new global environment, it is the role of governments to make sure that the marketplace continues to work competitively for businesses and consumers and the next era of globalization will be shaped by customers and technology (Manyika and Lund, 2019). According to the World Economic Forum, the diffusion of knowledge and technology worldwide in recent decades has brought important changes to the global innovation landscape. But those changes could be much more profound if countries created more supportive investment environments (Canuto, 2018). Similarly, much of the political upheaval in the Arab World has to do with the impact of globalization and technology on the economic confidence of people (Anderson & Coletto, 2017).

States and state organizations often face democratic challenges upon creating active social media content. These challenges vary between legitimacy via persuasion of the public by using information, and operations dealing with instruments aimed at control. This provides a situation where content can mean that transparency and accountability do not share the same boundaries. In effective messaging, transparency becomes a tool and a target (Bennett, Breunig and Givens, 2008). Cave (2015) explains that when used properly, digital diplomacy is a persuasive and timely supplement to traditional diplomacy that can help a country advance its foreign policy goals, extend international reach, and influence people who will never set foot in any of the world's embassies.

Digital diplomacy reduces the role of the government and gives social media a crucial role in determining the official policy. The use of digital media is easy and accessible to official organizations and governments. According to Adsina and Summers (2017), digital diplomacy refers to the growing use of digital media platforms by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manage its image and reputation. Countries are utilizing digital diplomacy in the pursuit of their foreign policies at two levels: that of the foreign ministry and that of embassies located around the world. By operating on these two levels, nations can tailor foreign-policy and nation-branding messages to the unique characteristics of local audiences regarding history, culture, values and traditions, thereby facilitating the acceptance of their foreign policy and the image they aim to promote. As explained by Fisher (2013), the advantage of social media provides the opportunity to reach citizens of other countries in near real-time while bypassing the restrictions of traditional media. In this way, social media have major weapons in modern politics and in the competition between countries. Digital diplomacy involves using the Internet and social media platforms by governments, to communicate with citizens, businesses and non-state actors, promote national values, and build public support for policy goals or strategies. Adsina (2017) explains that digital diplomacy uses digital tools of social media to communicate with the general public. Thus, the use of the Internet and new information technologies can help carry out diplomatic objectives. The result of new role of governments in the Arab World is that politics of the region changed as non-democracies witnessed how the rapid growth of social media became a vehicle for civic activism (Beissinger, 2017). Thus, today the digital landscape provides enormous opportunities for Arab governments to engage with new policies involving digital technologies (Garrett, 2019).

Conclusion

The Arab Spring broke as wide-spread dissatisfaction within the middle class seized on the opportunity provided by the demand for social and political change. The revolution created a breaking point for Arab regimes and mainstream media, as social media played a key role in starting, accelerating and organizing the uprisings and the mass revolutions that took place all over the Middle East. Social media provided the means to organized uprising outside the control of Arab governments, and for the first time in the history of the Arab World protesters could bypass the complete control of the mainstream media over the information provided to the public. Social media challenged the ultimate control of governments and the mainstream media and demonstrated to the world how the supremacy of new technology and global media enforce new standards on the old media-government establishment.

In order to understand the role of social media in the events that led and fueled these social revolutions, we need to examine the extent to which social media has been influencing the people of the Middle East. The research demonstrates that the impact of the people and social media changed the politics of the Middle East. The social revolutions that took place across the Arab World and the dominance of the Internet demonstrated how populous movements can lead to political reforms and create a wholly new global political environment. The research also maintains that the new media landscape enforced new standards on the way that traditional media operate. Social

networks provide instant and unlimited information, which is uncensored and not controlled by the old establishment of governments and mainstream media that controlled public agenda in the Arab World for decades.

Following the political events since 2011, the question remains whether the social revolutions could continue to enforce political change to a region that has long been plagued by authoritarianism. However, this question is still in debate. Whike Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad (2019) confirm social media's critical role, with its power to put a human face on political oppression, Brand (2017) explains that in an environment where free speech is allowed (although to a certain degree) in the Arab World, the use of social media, mainly by governments, became more sophisticated.

Another question that is still in debate is the ability of social movements to influence the politics of the Middle East despite the growing involvement of governments in technology. As can be learned from the events of the decade-long since 2011, the success of revolutions depends on the way that governments address demands of its people for political reforms and economic welfare. Tiruneh (2010) claims that democratic regimes can better influence political stability than do autocratic or authoritarian systems. The events in the Middle East proved that social movements encouraged by social media were the catalysts for later events which provided the impact of structures and networks on the power of social movements and on their ability to affect change (Abdalla, 2018). However, as explained by Hemple (2016), the way governments use technology to their benefits changed the ability of the people and social organizations to determine political changes. He explains that activists were able to organize and mobilize in 2011 because authoritarian governments didn't yet understand very much about how to use social media. In contrast, today governments take an aggressive hand in shutting down digital channels people use to organize against them. Shishkina and Issaev (2018) further explain that Internet censorship remains one of the most common methods of state control over the media, with the reasons for filtering cyberspace include ensuring the security of the current regime, attempts to limit all kinds of opposition movements, and the protection of the religious and moral norms of society.

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