



Cyberactivism in the Middle East: Six potentials and six limitations of new media technologies in democratization

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In late 2010 and early 2011, millions of Tunisians and Egyptians took to the streets expressing their discontent with decades of injustices, poverty, and corruption, and calling on their president to “get out.” People across the Arab world, male and female, young and old, and of all religious backgrounds were united for change, proud and inspired by the brave actions of Tunisians and Egyptians, as they felt for the first time in their lives that they have a voice as Arab citizens. The question that has been the center of discussion both in the Arab world and in the West is why now. What role did the new media tools play in motivating, facilitating, and sustaining these movements? And what can the unique features of social media portals contribute to the process of democratization and political participation in the Arab world?

On December 17, 2010, 25-year-old Tunisian street vegetable vendor Mohammed Bouazizi was beaten and insulted by government employees when he protested an inspector’s fine in Sidi Bouzid. His humiliation, dejection, and frustrations led to his self-immolation and later death in the hospital on January 4, 2011, generating widespread anger and sympathy across the Arab world. Bouazizi’s extreme and graphic act of dissent was considered the spark of revolutions in Tunisia, the Arab world, and beyond. A few months earlier, on 6 June 2010, Egyptian police beat Egyptian computer programmer Khaled Said to death, after posting a video on the internet of officers sharing the spoils of a drug bust among themselves. The post-mortem photographs of Khaled Said’s disfigured face went viral, and his was labeled “the death that inspired the protests” and a wake-up call for all Egyptians. Bouazizi and Said’s are the stories of many Arabs, and became known as the faces of injustice and oppression. While such injustices and brutality committed by authoritarian Arab regimes were common in the decades preceding these incidents (and still are), what is different in the 21st century is the proliferation of the Internet, social media platforms, and hand-held technologies. Were new and social media tools the catalysts that popularized these stories and made protesting injustices possible?

Cyber revolutions?

The online dissemination of the stories of Bouazizi and Said through social media platforms is believed to have triggered the “Arab Spring,” through exposing the injustice and corruption of repressive Arab regimes and igniting anger and rage among people. There is no doubt that in the pre-internet state-controlled media era in the Arab world, such emotionally charged images that can trigger anger and action among people, would not have been

possible to spread so widely. From this perspective, new media technologies and social media networks have been praised for being the sole causes and enablers of these uprisings calling them the “Facebook revolution” and the “Twitter revolution.” In order to assess the potential of cyberactivism, it is important to understand the role that social and new media tools can play in political participation and democratization.

The role of the Internet and communication technologies in social mobilization and political activism has been extensively debated among influential media critics and scholars, even before the “Arab Spring.” On the one hand, supporters of the cyber-utopian perspective argue that social media are important tools for coordinating activism and documenting events. More importantly, as Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* argues, social media tools enable strengthening the public sphere through increasing access to information and conversation, which are essential for achieving political freedom and democracy.¹ This perspective stresses the notion of cyberactivism, defined as “the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline.”²

On the other hand, Malcolm Gladwell, one of the most prominent critics of the techno-utopianism perspective, argues that real change is achieved through high-risk activism, strong group ties, and strategic hierarchies.³ Evgeny Morozov, author of *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* and *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, is another key skeptic of the role of social media in political activism and social change. From the perspective of the cyber-pessimist camp, social media are simply tools whereas social change involves long-term efforts and investment in offline activities.⁴ Morozov also contends that authoritarian and repressive regimes too have access to social media and the Internet, which they have used to identify and target activists.

Given the important potential of new media tools in supporting the process of democracy and enabling political participation, it is imperative to understanding the features of social media that help facilitate the democratic process as well those that pose limitations and risks to freedoms and political mobilization.

The democratizing potential of new media tools

1) The cyber public sphere

The most important advantage of social media networks and new media technologies is their affordance to strengthening the public sphere. The public sphere is a network of information and opinions on issues relevant to public concern.⁵ This space of informed citizenry and independent political debate is a necessary precursor for democracy and the political participation of citizens. Whereas this sphere is most strongly manifested

through the media, traditional media tools have failed to foster this necessary arena of political information and debate.

The state of traditional mainstream media in most countries is not conducive to such informed, free, and open discussions. In the U.S, for example, large media corporations and the commercial media model that trivializes political content and undermines serious public discussions have overtaken media reporting of political issues. Similarly, state-controlled media in repressive contexts prevent the creation and access to objective and independent information. In this regard, social media tools and Internet technologies provide alternative sources of information and spaces for independent political debates. Through increasing access to information and conversations, social media strengthen the public sphere, which is essential for achieving political freedom and democracy.⁶

2) *Platforms for free speech*

The second feature of new media tools that creates opportunities for political participation is providing platforms for free speech. As part of facilitating an independent public sphere, social media are used as forums for free speech and assembly, discussions about freedom and reform, political networking, and sharing evidence of injustices. By overcoming state control over information and expression and shifting control over the public sphere from the state to citizens, social media provided Egyptians a space where they can freely express their views and hold conversation about sociopolitical conditions.

3) *Overcoming distance*

Online and social media portals allow citizens to surpass geographic distance and social barriers, thus bringing isolated activists together into one online place for political networking and activism. Just like offline informal networks develop in coffee shops and public spaces, social media provide virtual spaces for assembly.⁷ Social media sites are important tools for establishing weak-ties and networking among members of political movements and between those movements and individuals. In the social network literature, the concept of weak ties refers to acquaintances (as opposed to strong ties with friends and family) that *present the “greatest source of new ideas and information,” which can be most easily accessed through the Internet.*⁸ In this regards, through bringing together networks of like-minded individuals from across geographic and social domains, online spaces can facilitate the expansion of activism (widening the circle) and overcome barriers to political participation.

In Egypt for example, disconnected activists who were in different parts of Egypt and socially isolated due to strong state control, were able to connect with others from opposition movements and form activism networks online. Egyptian activists had been engaged in ‘cyberactivism’ and online political networking since 2004, especially after Facebook was launched in Arabic in 2005. In fact, one of the most prominent protests organized online was the strike by the April 6 Youth Movement which took place in 2008.

4) *Citizens as producers*

The ability of new technologies to blur the lines between producers and consumers has vital democratizing potentials. Traditional media structures where only professionals were the producers of information have changed. This gatekeeping stage is eliminated, as citizens became producers of information not mere passive consumers. New media and technological advancements afforded activists in Egypt and Tunisia the ability to document incidents of police brutality and injustices (using hand-held devices) and share them instantly online, thus increasing the odds that misconduct by authorities will become widely known.⁹ Before the spread of social media in Tunisia and other Arab countries, incidents of self-immolation, regime brutality, and protests did exist but were ignored and quickly suppressed as they were not recorded and shared online, or easily accessed by millions of ordinary citizens. By providing the opportunity for activists to control the narrative and overcome state-controlled media, social media tools were used to document attacks on protestors and alert world opinion.

In addition, new media technologies and social media networks helped bridge between Egypt and outside communities and gain international support.¹⁰ By globalizing the movement and gaining international support to protect and sustain the uprising, social media created more credibility for activists and more accountability for behavior by the authorities, thus holding governments accountable and putting pressure on the regime and weakening it.

5) *Overcoming fear, building efficacy*

In authoritarian government systems, one of the greatest barriers to political mobilization is fear, the fear of being alone in dissent and the fear that one's activism poses dangers and threats to one's life. In this context, social media can help overcome this fear by emphasizing the sense of community and minimizing the feeling of isolation. Through bringing together disconnected Egyptians (who are afraid to express their discontent with the situation) into large online communities that share similar beliefs and aspirations, social media were able to demonstrate the collectiveness of the movement and strengthen the feeling of being part of a large community of dissidents.¹¹ People are more willing to act for change when they know that others feel the same way. In this sense, some even argue that the non-hierarchical nature of online networks facilitated a leaderless political movement, where no visible leadership figures could be held responsible or arrested by authorities.¹²

Moreover, based on Resource Mobilization Theory of social movements,¹³ the size of a social movement is considered as a resource that increases political efficacy (i.e., the perceived potential of collective action to achieve social change)¹⁴ and thus motivates individuals to take part in political activism. In this regard, social media tools contribute to overcoming the fear of being alone in opposition to the regime and increase the collective efficacy of the activists as agents of social change. For example, social media posts and images from Tahrir Square encouraged people to participate in the protests by demonstrating 'the power of the people.'¹⁵ The demonstration of people power is

contagious, and when it spreads through social media networks it inspires others and empowers them to act and take part in politics.

6) *Reducing transaction costs*

Social media promote collective action through reducing transaction costs for organizing protests and through presenting rapid and powerful channels for the dissemination of information.¹⁶ In particular, social media facilitated the progress of the Egyptian uprising because they provided platforms for planning and coordinating protests, announcing protest details, and boosting morale.¹⁷ New media tools also afforded instant updates about protest logistics and last minute changes to bypass police crackdown, and allowed for increased credibility and trust of protest information as people were able to access updates and directions from known figures and friends.¹⁸ In addition, social media allowed for the exchange of protest tactics between activists in Egypt and activists elsewhere.

The limitations and risks of new media tools

1) *Tools don't make revolutions, people do*

As Malcolm Gladwell argues, real change is achieved through high-risk activism. According to Gladwell, social media activism “succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.”¹⁹ The central argument here is that social media networks and new media technologies are merely tools that may or may not be used to support the fight for justice and reform, but the real necessary ingredients are people motivated to achieve change.

2) *Slacktivism*

The notion of slacktivism is defined as “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact.”²⁰ From this perspective, participating in online political groups, which is considered low-risk activism, provides an illusion of having impact on the real world and therefore prevents actual offline activism. In fact, the absence of the Internet in Egypt (when the Egyptian government blocked Internet and phone connections during the protests on January 28, 2011) might have escalated the protests, as slacktivism was no longer possible and people who felt the need to participate in the protests had no other option but to flock out to the streets.

Per slacktivism, people who want to support a social or political cause tend to perform minimal tasks online that require little effort, involvement, time, or risk, such as liking, sharing, or tweeting. These actions are believed to be beneficial only to the egos of the individuals performing them, having very little practical effects on the ground. In this case, the satisfaction of a click of a button as ‘online activism’ replaces substantive

traditional activism efforts that are proven to make real changes on the ground.

3) *Social media in the hands of evil*

While social media tools can help support activist's effort to achieve democracy and reform, these tools can also be used in similar ways by autocratic regimes and extremist groups. Authoritarian governments across countries also understand the power of social media, and use them or block them in order to limit freedom of speech and online political activism. For example, Facebook and YouTube, which had been blocked in Syria for 3 years, were unblocked in February 2011 with the start of the anti-government protests in Syria. Lifting the ban on Facebook and YouTube is believed to be an attempt by the Syrian regime to monitor people and political activity online, as well as identify and crack down on activists through online platforms.²¹

The so-called "Islamic State" or ISIS is also known to use sophisticated online digital media tools to recruit fighters and encourage attacks. Social media platforms and forums that enable free discussions of democracy, civil society, and rule of law, also enable extremist discussions and the sharing of opinions that promote hatred, dehumanization, and violence. For example, the recent attacks in Paris, Lyon, and on Charlie Hebdo were preceded by ISIS video releases targeting French citizens and encouraging them to join ISIS and commit attacks in France.²²

4) *The digital divide*

The digital divide refers to the technological gap between individuals, groups, countries and geographic regions based on the opportunities they have to access Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and use them for various activities including economic development, health and safety, education and information, political participation, and civic life.²³ ICTs can include anything from telephones, computers, and Internet, to the quality of connections, affordability, and availability of access devices.

In the Arab world in particular, there is a double digital divide where there is a divide between rich Gulf countries and the rest of the Arab world, and a second divide between Arab countries and the rest of the world.²⁴ This discrepancy in access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is very important with regard to democratization, where digital access determines access to political information, knowledge, participation, and expression. The digital divide means that people with access to technology have exclusive opportunities for political participation. Because the digital divide mirrors existing social inequalities,²⁵ the advantage of social media tools in fostering an environment of information sharing and free expression of ideas and opinions, is limited to those on the higher end of the socio-economic spectrum.

5) *Resources needed for change*

While social media tools provide the opportunities to seek information alternative to

state-controlled and commercial media models and to engage with political movements, such initiatives require a certain level of skill and knowledge (technical, political, etc.) as well as the motivation to do so. Average citizens are not always able or willing to invest the extra time and effort. As a result, online networks give further credence to the traditional gatekeeping measures, as they provide prominence to the same influential players of the offline public arena and the traditional media models, such as famous figures and known journalists.²⁶

6) *Lack of hierarchy and leadership*

In the context of high-risk political movements, social media networks are known to lack hierarchies and with them a clear distribution of roles and tasks,²⁷ almost eliminating the visibility of leadership positions and figures. While the lack of hierarchal structure and leadership is sometimes praised for enabling a “revolution of the people,” this very feature may have contributed to the post-uprising fall of the very political movements that created the change. Had the protests been organized and led offline, certain figures may have been visible and recognizable as worthy of the people’s votes. With the absence of these figures, the political post-Mubarak sphere in Egypt returned to the usual narrative known all too well in Arab countries of the dichotomy between repressive and military regimes versus Islamic political parties, who battle it out (most often violently) at the expense of people’s lives, the prospect for reform, and the sacrifices made for a real change.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although most analysts of the role of social media in the “Arab Spring” agree that it was not a “Facebook revolution” or a “Twitter revolution” as has been circulated in popular media, there is no doubt that social media tools played a vital democratizing role in the stages leading up to the protests, during the protests, and in the post-uprising phase. More broadly, social media tools and new media technologies have great potential in promoting and fostering democracy through free independent and open political debates and information sharing. In addition, information and communication technologies can help enable change through triggering, inspiring, organizing, facilitating, accelerating, documenting, and broadcasting protests and political activism.

However, crediting political movements to social media understates the complexities of social movements and the human sacrifices that are made to achieve change. It is important to acknowledge both the controlling as well as the emancipatory potentials of social media in political participation and reform. New media are tools and the role of these new media tools is contingent upon politico-economic conditions and the nature of political movements on the ground. Moreover, the role social media play is unique to each situation, especially given the

vast differences among countries in the availability of Internet and technology, the political systems, social structures, and the degree of regime control over media and information.

In sum, social media as tools are necessary but not sufficient factors in bringing actual political change. There is no doubt that social media do play a vital role, however the question now must be ‘how’: how to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of the Internet, new media technologies, and social media platforms. We need to move from the perspectives of cyber-optimism and cyber-pessimism to a cyber-realist approach, and instate programs and projects that enable the full access to information and communication technologies tools and promote their uses in fostering democracy and reform across the Middle East.

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