

The Evolution of Revolution: Social Media in the Modern Middle East and its Policy Implications

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Wael Ghonim, a 30-year-old Egyptian who works as an executive for Google, enjoyed a house in the United Arab Emirates with a pool and a nice car. But when news of the Egyptian protests reached him in January 2011, he anonymously started a Facebook page supporting a martyred dissident and traveled back to Cairo.

The 500,000 member Facebook group “We are all Khalid Said” became a virtual rallying point. Protests were organized on the site, and posts exposed police brutality in graphic pictures and descriptions. Days later he was in an Egyptian prison, a casualty of a 30-year-old emergency law that allowed the government to arrest and detain him without charge. Ghonim’s disappearance sparked a massive campaign against the Mubarak regime to release him, spearheaded by his employer, the United States, and the rage of the Egyptian street.

Hours after his release from days of torture and captivity, Ghonim appeared on Egyptian TV in front of tens of millions of his countrymen. His tears and impassioned pleas for the overthrow of the regime and the creation of a new Egypt revitalized the masses to continue protesting. He said later, “If you want to liberate a society, just give them the internet.”¹

Cyber-pessimistic scholars like Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell dispute the notion that social media is a “magic pill” for the subjugated in the Middle East. Says Morozov, “The idea that the internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor is marred by what I call cyber-utopianism: a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to admit its downside.”² Still, scholars and politicians like Clay Shirky and Nicholas Kristof suggest otherwise. Condoleezza Rice

trumpeted the internet’s utility as a tool for the oppressed, saying “the internet is possibly one of the greatest tools for democratization and individual freedom that we’ve ever seen.”³ Is social media democratizing by nature? How do cultural, social, and structural factors impact its potential influence? And finally, to what extent is the phenomenon responsible for the Middle Eastern uprisings?

The social media umbrella, which encompasses mobile texting, e-mail, social networking, and photo and video-sharing, certainly plays a role in disseminating information, galvanizing support, and

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organizing protests.⁴ But how does one determine the nature, degree, and extent of its role in political dissidence?

This paper will draw parallels between the availability of social media and its potential for political dissidence. It will show that despite popular belief, social media is not inherently democratizing. It will delineate how Lessig’s Framework of Regulation can compare the varying degrees of social media in the Middle East. Finally, it will argue that social media is not a prerequisite to revolution but rather an accelerant to the process of political dissent.

Social Media: A Dissident’s Dream?

Specifically, what is the relationship between social media and political dissidence? Why did the Egyptian state, which received \$1.3 billion in military aid from the U.S. in 2010, feel it was necessary to kidnap a Google executive during protests? What is it about text messages, e-mail, and sites like YouTube and Twitter that scare long-standing authoritarian regimes?

Social media allows people to contribute to a virtual public discourse that they would otherwise not be able to take part in. Cyberspace and mobile networks form a gateway to a virtual world removed from police brutality, hierarchies, and corrupt



Egyptian citizens protesting on Tahir Square, Cairo, against the Mubarak regime earlier in 2011.

representation. This is a virtual world where the best ideas resonate without regard for the identity of the author. The male-dominated Middle East demonstrates the disparity between the physical and virtual. While women are restricted from joining the political chatter of the neighborhood water-pipe lounge, they are taking more liberties online. “They cannot go to the park unaccompanied and meet friends, but they can join a chat room or send instant messages,” a member of a Jordanian-based social media group explains.⁵ Social norms and customs are less of a hindrance with speech on the internet, and people that previously lacked a voice are finding access to one online.

Social media provides real-time information, up-to-date and unmolested, unlike Arab state television and government propaganda. Freedom of the internet means that people choose their sources, and those reputed as trustworthy rise to the top. Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan, and Syrian authoritarians tried to cow citizens by alleging that foreign conspiracy fueled the revolutionary fire. Due to access to independent news, many came to view these tactics as less credible. A freer internet exposes this propaganda by allowing for a meritocracy of ideas in a public discourse.

However, proliferation of information via social media does not allow for content control that traditional media outlets have. Consequently, the same tool that brings freedom and democracy can also be wielded to misinform. This real-time knowledge beguiles bogus claims, but can also cause hysteria and panic. Images of the Danish cartoon and news of the Quran-burning controversy that incited thousands to riot and kill across the Muslim world would not have spread as fast and as far in a world without social media.

Whether it is used to incite unrest or promote democracy, social media is a superior tool for political dissidence precisely because it was not engineered for any particular narrow focus. Its multifaceted nature means people who contribute to political dissidence blend in with those who use it to post photos, gossip, and keep in contact with friends and family.

The ubiquity of social media among many types of users means that governments cannot pinpoint individual dissidents as easily. Comparatively, as Clay Shirky argues, specialized encryption software specifically designed for dissident groups can be exposed by authoritarian government intelligence agencies.⁶ In addition to providing a private way for citizens to communicate amongst themselves, social media is used to organize, galvanize support, and promote causes of all kinds, politically motivated or not. A popular sociological theory explains the formation of an opinion in two integral steps. First,

viewpoints are transmitted by television and other forms of media. Opinions are formed in the second step, when family, friends, and acquaintances reiterate these viewpoints.⁷ Social media is a virtual replication of this process; in a sense, it is an “echo box.”

Social Media: Inherently Democratic?

Some experts believe fervently in Christopher Kedzie’s dictator’s dilemma theory (1997). With the existence of unchecked forums for public discourse, an autocratic state faces a dilemma: to censor dissidence or fight back with propaganda. Both choices run the risk of radicalizing citizens. According to the dictator’s dilemma, Egypt’s shutdown of mobile and internet networks during the protests in February 2011 risked alienating otherwise pro-Mubarak citizens whose communications were interrupted at a time of crisis. Likewise, the U.A.E and Saudi Arabia



Opposition rally in Iran due to the 2009 presidential election.

angered citizens in 2010 when they banned Blackberry phones for fear that dissident groups were using the popular Messenger feature to communicate while avoiding prying eyes. This decision also caused collateral damage, inconveniencing many more legal users than illegal users, offering a perfect example of the dictator’s dilemma. Thus, the theory posits that the mere presence of social media confronts regimes with hard choices, most of which lead to increased freedom of communication and political dissent.

Though a compelling argument, the dictator’s dilemma theory overlooks many

factors. The existence of social media is not a guarantee that a disgruntled population will unite or democratize at all. More separate and systemic environmental realities help political dissent transition into organized revolution, and these can explain why some countries in the Middle East face more serious threats to the established order than others.

Population density and homogeneity are extremely telling demographic factors helpful in enabling revolutionaries to coalesce. Take Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya as examples of the Middle Eastern countries that have faced the most serious changes in the political status quo. In Egypt, the Nile functions as the lifeblood of a country that is overwhelmingly desert and mountains. The consequence is a situation in which 95 percent of Egyptians live on less than four percent of its land. Tunisia and Libya are similar. Sixty-seven percent of Tunisians and 78 percent of Libyans live in populous cities near the coast.^{8,9} An ethnically homogenous country like Egypt (99.6 percent Egyptian) saw regime change become a reality in a matter of days.¹⁰ Tribal Libya took months, even with NATO help, to finally overcome loyal Qaddafi militias. Meanwhile Bahrain’s protests failed; the lack of religious homogeneity certainly did not help create an incentive for members of the Sunni ruling class to defect to the Shi’a majority’s side.

Even when protesters coalesce, demands are met, and dictators are dead or deposed, democracy is not concrete inevitability. Popular revolutions have happened before and failed. In Iran in 1979, a popular revolution was an excuse for a power-hungry mullah to wrest authoritarian control from the Shah. In Tunisia and Egypt, remnants of the former ruling parties are still trying to use their structural advantage to take representation away from upstart democratic parties. Conditions like population density and homogeneity are factors that correlate with successful revolutions. These affect social media’s ability to be a potent accelerant to revolution. Therefore, it is premature to

assume that the political dissent fostered by social media alone will automatically translate to freedom and democracy in the Middle East.

Regulators on Social Media in the Middle East

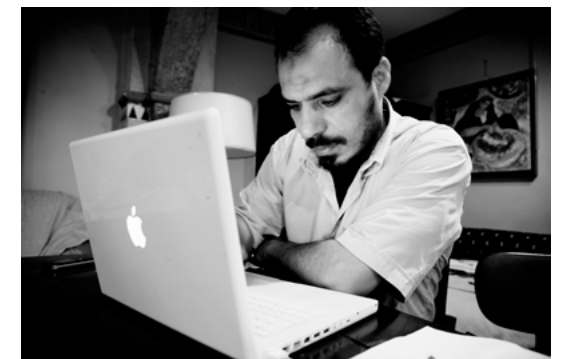
To explain the degree of social media availability in authoritarian regimes, scholars need a common schema. This paper adapts Lawrence Lessig’s framework of regulation to examine the relationship between social media and political dissidence (Lessig 1999). Lessig’s framework uses a highly adaptable four-variable system that shows how forces regulate an object, in this case, social media.¹¹ Syria, a country that is infamous for its systematic repression and killing of at least 3500 of its own citizens since March 2011, is a suitable environment to test this framework. Lessig’s framework calls for examining law, markets, norms, and architecture in a holistic analysis to gauge the degree to which these factors ease or hamper use of social media. This paper assumes that increased use of social media leads to an increase in civil discourse, which in turn allows for an increased degree of political dissent.

Efforts to spread dissidence in Syria reflect social media efforts in other protests such as Wael Ghonim’s memorial page “We Are All Khaled Saeed” on Facebook. Another example is the page “We Are All Child Martyr Hamza Alkhateeb” which serves as a hub to memorialize the 13-year-old who was tortured and killed by Syrian police after participating in a protest in the province of Dar’a in April.¹² By implementing Lessig’s framework, one can see more clearly what barriers the page’s administrator faces to maintain the site, which publishes a barrage of anti-government information and news daily.¹³

In Syria, an authoritarian regime that Reporters Without Borders bestowed the unenviable distinction of being among the “enemies of the internet,” there are no shortage of laws abridging free use of social media. Laws, Lessig’s first category, regulate usage

of social media by threatening punishment for the defiance of a command. The state in question has the agency here, especially given President Assad’s continued ignorance of international law during the crackdown.

Syria’s four-year ban on Facebook ended on February 9 2011, and there are now over 580,000 users in the country.¹⁴ The publisher of a revolutionary-sympathetic page like Hamza Alkhateeb’s would no doubt be cognizant of the specter of criminal prosecution, harassment, and torture if he or she resided in Syria. There have been many reports of security services demanding certain users’ Facebook passwords.¹⁴ Offline print and publication law is extended to online publishing in Syria, and comes with heavy restrictions on criticism of the regime. Though President Assad ended the emergency rule that since 1963 had banned public demonstrations, placed the media in control



Ghazi el-Mahalla labor leader Kamal el-Fayoumi experimenting with Twitter.

of the state, and allowed it to spy on its own citizens, if anything laws regulating the use of social media and the internet have increased in rigidity and scope.¹⁵

On 28 August 2011 Syria strengthened its regulation of free speech by introducing a law mandating “responsible freedom of expression”. It bans reports about the armed forces entirely, and further places restrictions on news that exhorts violence, sectarian division, or endangers the country’s unity¹⁶. Perhaps sensing a threat from the anonymity allowed in internet cafés from which the

majority of Syrians get online, the regime ordered that the cafés save the names and ID cards of patrons in March 2008.¹⁷ More recently, the Syrian government has shut down mobile 3G networks, making it harder to upload video online and communicate by phone. Clearly, the established laws criminalizing online dissent work against the free use of social media in Syria.

Markets, Lessig's second regulator, are not always incumbent on government action. In Syria, however, where the Ministry of Telecommunications and Technology has a monopoly on telecommunications infrastructure and internet service providers, there is limited competition between private telecommunications companies and

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therefore little reason for internet price to gravitate downwards.¹⁷ The administrator of a Facebook page like the one memorializing Hamza Elkhateeb would therefore have to be economically stable enough to afford home internet (the privilege of 20 percent of Syrians) or maintain the site through internet cafés, which cost only a small fee per hour but whose networks are monitored by the regime.¹⁷

The trend of telecommunications privatization has mostly eluded Syria but translated to lower prices in countries like Egypt. In Syria, mobile phones are widespread but the 3G service that allows them to connect and upload media to the internet is around \$50 a month, "prohibitively expensive" for ordinary Syrians.¹⁷

Inexpensive internet service is a boon to the availability of social media, since it encourages a wide range of users to share information, educate themselves, and debate each other online.¹¹ A Facebook page administrator would be able to reach a larger

audience as he or she spreads information harmful to the regime. The opposite is also true. Countries with little or no private competition can keep prices artificially high to limit internet penetration from the masses.¹¹ Syria's reluctance to open the telecommunications market may show that it fears widespread access. Overall, market regulators seem to be working against the availability of the internet in Syria and the access to civil discourse it affords.

Normative regulators are fluid and are evidenced on the basis of what behavior is acceptable or unacceptable in the community. This factor can explain the absence of dissent in a country, though typically difficult to quantify or measure. A powerful normative regulator is self-censorship. The stigma associated with spreading an unwelcome or controversial message through social media may make our Facebook administrator think twice about posting in the first place, unless he or she resides in a neighborhood or area that aligns itself against the Syrian regime. This is especially applicable if doing so may endanger or reflect badly on the family. In a region where young adults (the foremost users of social media) often live with parents until marriage, the social risks of engaging in dissent can outweigh the benefits. But recent events seem to be changing this status quo. Entrenched dictators like Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Muammar Qaddafi have proven vulnerable, and politically minded citizens have noticed. The result is a domino effect: the more people who openly flout restrictions, the more people are emboldened to do the same. Norms are subject to the winds of cultural change, and part of what makes revolutions so revolutionary is that people feel empowered to go against these norms.

Lessig's last regulator is architecture, or the network infrastructure and internet coding. Rules that govern coding and infrastructure place limits on the scope and breadth of social media communication. For example, the nature of Facebook governs that

the administrator of the Hamza Alkhateeb page can only send messages to Facebook followers and those who indicate they "like" the page. Syria takes advantage of the architecture of the internet to pinpoint dissidence. Filtration software sifts out "deviant" content, blocks users from accessing critical political sites, and stops citizens from associating with banned groups. OpenNet Initiative categorizes this political filtering as "pervasive."¹⁷

There is a counterweight, however. Dissidents and secret groups can use encryption software to disguise and verify communications without third party interference. There are also proxy servers that individuals can use to hide IP addresses from the government. In Syria, pervasive filtering, censorship, and spying uses the architecture of the internet for purposes that restrict free access to social media.

Conclusion

Given the link between social media and social dissidence in addition to the aforementioned Framework of Regulation, it is simpler to evaluate how the prevalence of social media can play an integral factor in transitioning dissidence to full-blown revolution. But as this transition progresses it is at the mercy of factors not completely at the behest of the parties involved. For example, the willingness of a dictator to choose relative restraint, reform, or brutality in the face of opposition plays a factor not explained by Lessig's framework. "You can't turn off the light and kill people now as you could turn off the light a generation ago and get away with it," the professor Fouad Ajami stated on the TV program The Situation Room on March 22, 2011.¹⁸ This is correct, but as the dire situation the Syrian protestors face suggests, a harsh initial crackdown can kill the flashpoint momentum of a revolutionary movement. Similarly, the absence of a significant social media presence does not mean that a revolution cannot occur. Let us remember, popular revolutions in the area happened

before social media came about in Algeria in 1962 and Iran in 1979.

Therefore, rather than serving as a prerequisite to revolution, social media can be considered an accelerant to revolution. It does not foment revolutionary fervor; instead, it acts as a medium for that fervor to spread and galvanize the connected masses. Though reports of Twitter and Facebook being responsible for revolution have gained popularity, this notion is exaggerated and misleading because it leaves out the more traditional means of organizing. More likely, social media has helped the spread of information, but not as much as general word of mouth in the cities of Cairo, Tunis, and Benghazi.

This paper tries to illuminate the link between social media and political dissidence while providing a systematic framework to compare the degree of social media in authoritarian regimes. It stops short of crediting social media with the recent Middle East revolutions, instead pointing out that more traditional factors like population density and word of mouth play an underestimated role. There is a big difference between having a million virtual friends on the internet and a million marching on the street. In the end, social media as a vehicle of truth should never be underestimated. As George Orwell said, "During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act."