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Social Media and Its Effectiveness in the Political Reform Movement in Egypt

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Abstract

This article examines the role of social media in political and social revolution in Egypt. It reveals how social media enhanced and ignited people's desire for democracy and socio-economic advancement stalled by the long term authoritarian government. The main focus is on the importance of social media as a platform for discussion of ideas, experiences, and knowledge exchange: The big social media networks like Facebook and Twitter and individual blogs have emerged as powerful channels that allowed people in Egypt to bypass government censorship, spread the words of political reform, and break the barrier of fear. They mobilized millions of citizens to participate in political action and emerged as authoring agents and organizational power structures. The paper includes information about the demographics, education, and young age of the population of Egypt contributing to the political uprisings.

Introduction

As countries around the world discover the influence of social media, citizens have begun to use its power to better their lives; one such country, Egypt, has created a new standard for social reform through social media and networking. Egypt possesses a long and rich history, a cohesive kingdom from around 3200 B.C. Over thousands of years, various nations ruled Egypt; in 1952, it finally gained independence from outside rulers, ousting the British-backed monarchy. Since then Egypt has been a republic, and until the revolution of 2011, was ruled by President Hosni Mubarak who had attempted to reform Egypt's slow economy by decentralizing it; however, that didn't work, and Egypt's citizens remain poor, 20 percent living below poverty level. The country ranks 21st in the world for Internet users, with just over 20 million users in 2009 out of a population of 83 million or roughly one quarter (The World Factbook, 2011). This is surprising if one considers the Internet a vital instrument in the Egyptian revolt.

Social media and networking have come to define a new generation of communication and have created a platform that possesses limitless abilities to connect, share, and explore our world. Social media is not a new idea, however; people have used technology for decades now to communicate, mobilize voters for political participation and, "while it has only recently become part of mainstream culture and the business world, people have been using digital media for networking, socializing and information gathering – almost exactly like now – for over 30 years" (Borders, 2009).

Social media is content created and shared by individuals on the web using available websites which allow members of the site to create and display their photos, thoughts, and videos. Social media allows people to share content with a select group or with everyone. Social media is a way for communicating with one or more people at the same time. Using these sites allows people to communicate in real-time and thereby is effective in developing democracy because social media sites give people a voice to express their opinions about government, television, political leaders, and any other issues of concern. Sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube allow power to be shifted to people. They create two-way communication between individuals or small groups and the general public.

Causes of Egypt's Revolution

During Egypt's modern period from the revolution of 1952 to the present, there have been struggles at the top of government, but only recently has the popular outcry for social reform become visible. In 1981, Egypt's leader Anwar Sadat was assassinated, bringing President Mubarak into power (Recent history of Egypt, 2009). Mubarak ruled with an autocratic style, and continued to enforce the Emergency Law 30 years after Sadat's assassination. The Emergency Law "allows police to arrest people without charge, detain prisoners indefinitely, limit freedom of expression and assembly, and maintain a special security court" (Egypt New – Revolution, 2011).

Although the law supposedly applied mainly to drug trafficking and terrorism, it was abused so greatly that the government's promise to use it sparingly proved meaningless, angering Egypt's population. In 2010, people's grievances grew exponentially as multiple problems with security, terrorism, and the economy worsened. On January 25, 2011, Egyptians took to the streets in Cairo, Alexandria, and some other places in the so called Day of Revolt, concentrating their grievances on legal and political matters. Rather than a typical small protest, the Day of Revolt exploded into a monumental moment in Egypt's history because of social media. Social media did not cause Egypt's revolution; however, it accelerated the movement. Viral videos, such as Asmaa Mahfouz's, and the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia created a surge of emotion in Egyptians, persuading them to protest.

Egyptian protestors used Facebook and Twitter to get people out on the streets within the country and YouTube to let the world know what was happening. By using tools that the regime underestimated, activists were able to spread hope, not only to Egyptians, but also worldwide, encouraging other repressed populations to attempt something similar in their countries. Because of the protests, President Mubarak stepped down and turned his power over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces; however, at the time of publication, protests continue in an effort to speed the process of what many Egyptians see as extinguishing the last remnants of the old regime. Without social media allowing Egyptians to communicate with the outside world, the government would have been able to quickly suppress the protests.

The people of Egypt were influenced by the earlier revolution in Tunisia where thousands of people protested unemployment, government corruption, and poverty by taking over the streets. The Tunisian revolution and its success in eliminating the long time leader caught the attention of Egyptians facing similar issues. Egyptians wanted change in their country and the elimination of President Mubarak who had been in power for 30 years. Social media sites helped spark and organize the first protest on January 25, 2011 which 85,000 people had pledged on Facebook to attend. When the government used force, the situation gained international attention on Twitter and YouTube. We must remember, however, that without the perseverance of the Egyptian people, the revolution would have never happened, leaving the question: To what extent does social media affect revolution in Egypt?

The economic and social situation is dire. On April 22, 2011, the US dollar is equivalent to approximately six Egyptian pounds (EGP). Wages are approximately 35 EGP per month for most people, and 289 EGP for government employees and sector workers, meaning 6 USD and 48 USD respectively. Fatah El-Gebali is quoted (Mcgrath, 2010) as saying, "There is a big problem in reaching a consensus on the issue. The trade unions want to set the minimum wage around 1,200 Egyptian pounds (200 USD) per month, while business associations want a maximum of 400 Egyptian Pounds (67 USD)." The fairest minimum wage, based on a 25 percent per capita of GNP, appears to be around 733 EGP (122 USD). At that rate, economist Samir Radawan states, "the share of those who would receive the minimum wage is not significant enough to have a dent on inflation." Current minimum wages have not increased since 1984 although inflation has.

According to statistics from the CIA (2011): the unemployment rate was 9.4 percent in 2009 and 9.7 percent in 2010; population below poverty level was 20 percent; inflation was 11.9 percent in 2009 and 12.8 percent in 2010; in 2010 the budget showed revenue of 46 billion and 64 billion expenditures; the debt rose from 29.66 billion to 30.61 billion in the year from 2009 - 2010; and in 2010 imports were nearly double exports. The literacy rate is quite low according to the CIA with around 83 percent male and 59.4 percent female literacy rates in 2005; in 2008 3.8 percent of the nation's gross profit went toward education. The mean age of citizens is 24 years of age; therefore, the majority of the citizens are likely to be aware of the media around them and thus likely to be knowledgeable about the impact of the economic situation on their future.

Role of Social Media in the Revolution

Philip Howard (2011) quoted an activist in Cairo as saying, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world." This statement sums up the use of social media in the protest. Newsweek.com offers a collection of videos that are posted chronologically:

<http://www.newsweek.com/2011/01/28/youtube-captures-scenes-from-egypt-protests.html>.

Newsweek calls it the Facebook Revolt; in fact, it could also be called the Twitter Revolution, the first of its kind. However, not everyone agrees with the Facebook Revolution concept. Malcom Gladwell believes that the influence of social media is limited, and the revolutions would have happened anyway: "I mean, in cases where there are no tools of communication, people still get together. So I don't see that as being... in looking at history, I don't see the absence of efficient tools of communication as being a limiting factor on the ability of people to socially organize" (Ingram, 2011).

Gladwell is correct that the revolution would have happened without social media because revolutions happened in the past when the internet didn't exist; however, the revolution probably would not have happened as soon, and probably would not have sparked as quickly as it did. People were able to coordinate protests and bring out larger numbers because of Facebook and Twitter, and they were able to show what actually was happening, and counter government attempts to play down the situation because of YouTube. Social media also shaped the way the world viewed the protests. For instance, an Egyptian blogger stated, "I urge you to use the words 'revolt' and 'uprising' and 'revolution' and not 'chaos' and not 'unrest.' We are talking about a historic moment." Shortly after CNN changed a headline from "CHAOS IN EGYPT" to "UPRISING IN EGYPT" (Boyd, 2011).

Obviously, the Egyptian government that was being overthrown agreed that social media was significant because it tried to block the key sites. This is confirmed by a tweet from twitterglobalpr: "We can confirm that Twitter was blocked in Egypt around 8am [January 25th]. It is impacting both Twitter.com and applications. We believe that the open exchange of info and views benefits societies and helps [governments] better connect [with] their people" (Ungeleider, 2011).

Also confirmed were blocking of Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and mobile phones. Ungeleider reports that people in Tahrir Square were unlocking their WiFi signals to allow for mobile phones to get around the blocks; proxy servers were also used which change the URL to hide which site is being surfed. There are too many proxies to block them all.

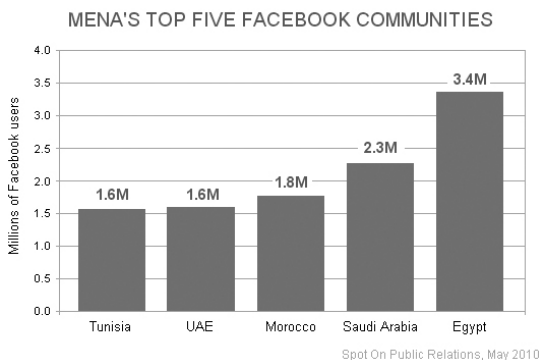
Social Media on the rise in Egypt

Social media allowed Egyptians living under dictatorship to communicate with the world. Egyptians used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to send millions of internet links, news, articles,

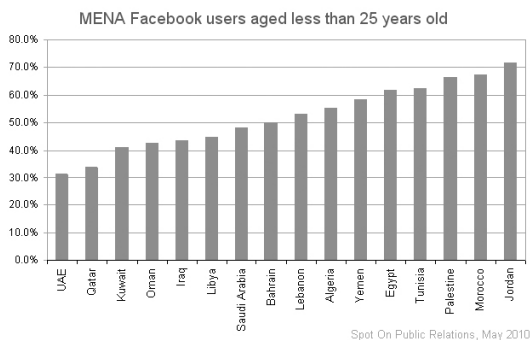
videos, and free campaigns to people all over the world. The internet allowed people living in a state that controlled traditional media to complain about conditions. News quickly spread because Twitter allowed Egyptians to upload information in as it happened and write comments about their government. This helped to gain national attention because Egyptians wanted change for their country. Social media allowed the free speech that wasn't allowed by the government.

Facebook in Egypt

Facebook helped to get the messages out to the world about the devastation that was occurring in Egypt through photos and videos. An Egyptian named Khaled Said was killed after he posted a video of police officers engaging in illegal activity. The photos of the dead man on Facebook were so gruesome that they angered Egyptians tired of brutality, immoral arrest, and crooked government. Shortly after, Wael Ghonim created a Facebook page titled "We Are All Khaled Said." That Facebook page gained 500,000 members. This led to Ghonim's being captured, blindfolded, and detained for 10 days. Ghonim who later became the symbol of Egypt's pro-democracy tweeted "Freedom is a bless that deserves fighting for." This motivated thousands of Egyptians who agreed to keep protesting. As the protests continued, more people in Egypt turned to Facebook to see videos, pictures, make comments, and discuss the political revolution for democracy, freedom of speech, and socio-economic change.



Out of the five Middle Eastern countries Egypt has the most Facebook users at 3.4 million people. According to indexmundi.com, one in five Egyptians is between the ages of 15-24 which represented the majority of those who protested on the street. (www.indexmundi.com).



About 62 percent of Egyptian Facebook users were under 25 in 2010 before the revolution took place. Charts courtesy of SpotOn Public Relations.

YouTube and Egypt

Videos on YouTube showed thousands of people marching, fighting, and running from tear gas. It was a battle for justice that was captured on YouTube for the world to see. Protestors were shot, hit with rocks, run over by vans, and killed by police officers. YouTube was the social medium that captured the action of the 18-day Revolution. People chanted, “Don’t leave until [Mubarak] leaves,” and held sit-ins. The videos gave international exposure to the violence. YouTube also allowed subscribers to comment on the videos. One subscriber stated, “I’m Egyptian, I’m 20 years old and I saw no hope, no future, no justice, nothing...God bless everyone who sacrificed their lives for us to lead a better life...” This is just one example of how a single thought that expresses a person’s feelings can be read around the world. YouTube established a democracy where everyone is able to express an opinion through the internet.

The Government Tries to Fight Back

With the uproar of the social media, more people began expressing themselves in a society where it was uncommon. To retaliate, the government decided to shut down all social media sites to prevent interaction with other nations. On January 29, 2011, Twitter and other social media sites were blocked. The government must have thought that this move would stop the protests. However, the Egyptian Revolution was a key interest on social media sites that captured the attention of a lot of people. Egypt remained a trending topic on Twitter even while the site was blocked in Egypt.

Habib Haddad helps Egyptians Regain Their Voice

When the government disabled social media sites, Habib Haddad created an alternative to help spread the message. He teamed with Google and Twitter and found at least 1,000 translators who translated Arabic tweets into French, German, and English. This gave people in other countries a way to continue to communicate with Egyptians and to stay informed about what was happening. The application was called Speak2Tweet, and it allowed people to leave voice messages that were posted to Twitter. On February 11, 2011, known as Farewell Friday, Hosni Mubarak stepped down after 30 years. Eighteen days after the protests began in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, Egyptians finally shouted victory. They had joined together to defeat the government with the help of social media.

Conclusion

The new revolution in social media has exploded into an effective tool of communication, not only to connect socially, but also to ignite political reform and social action. Perhaps social media was not absolutely critical to the uprising in Egypt; however, it made protest possible sooner, and helped it develop in a way that would have been impossible without social media. Looking at the impact of Facebook here in America, I see that people ask for a Facebook profile instead of a telephone number; they chat online instead of talking on the phone; emailing has started to decline compared to increasing use of social media and blogging. Around the world social media has opened new possibilities for communication and social change.

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