Revolutions in the Age of Social Media

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Since the popularization of the Internet in the mid 90s, one of its by-products,

social media, has taken charge in shaping the way the world works. Social media, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary are “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (“Social Media”). Forms of social media may include Facebook, Twitter, blogs, text-messages, amongst many other mediums. The increase in usage of social media has changed the way in which people communicate, businesses market their product, and politicians organize their campaigns (Rishika, 108). Take for example the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama that changed the way by which political campaigns are run. In recent history the significant campaign funds are granted by corporations, industry lobby organizations, unions, and other large bodies that have an interest in shaping public policy (Kang, 3). Through the a large social media presence and the creation of a micro-funding website, Obama gained support from voters to the point of raising millions of dollars in campaign funds from individual donors contributing $200 or less (Vernallis, 77).

Revolutions have been around since the beginning of states, although with progression in dominant cultural philosophies and technologies the desired outcomes and ways of achieving those outcomes have changed. One great change in the political-revolutionary process is marked by the dawn of the industrial revolution, but another catalyst of change is found in the growth of communications technologies, more specifically, social media. Seeing the pre-social media age existence of revolutions, it is not adequate to say that social media is the *cause* of revolution, but rather it *aids* the opposition in leading a successful revolt. Previous research on the relationship between social media and revolutions has provided possible explanations as to how the technology has effected specific revolutions without placing the relationship on a larger theoretical scale. My hypothesis is that social media expedites the revolutionary process by providing a freer platform for the dissemination of information, which leads to the unification of unique local movements and increased participation by those who in the past may have been idle during uprisings.

A revolution occurs when a dominant body, be it political regime or set of cultural values, is overthrown by another, leaving a new governing order. Revolutions change a society, only to leave room for another revolution in the future. Political scientists have studied revolution in depth and have found a number of different factors that contribute to the development and success of a revolution. Economic inequality, civil unrest, and oppressive government regimes are amongst the most common factors, although others must be taken into account such as population growth and over urbanization, accompanied by increased social mobility with no parallel political growth (Firouzbakhch, 85).

Crucial to the success of a revolution is the centralization of the various local protest movements (Firouzbakhch, 87). Many revolutions start with various different groups igniting the revolutionary flame in various different locations, for various different reasons. Groups range in age, social, and economic status, beyond geographical disparities, that have the same mission of taking down the standing regime, but in order to make grand change there needs to be a coherent, unified movement (Zemni et. al, 900). Studying the Tunisian revolution 2011, Sami Zemni, Brecht De Smet, and Koenraad Bogaert observed that the revolution started as a local struggle of workers, the youth, and the marginalized (898). The middle-class, squeezed by an economic crisis, soon began to dissent, and eventually even some from the elite-upper class formed a movement to remove president Ben Ali. The protest movement “did not arise from a preconceived plan,” but rather came together from unique points, each one “from different causes and in different forms” (896). Eventually, the broad range of forces with the common enemy of Ben Ali, unofficially formed an alliance turning the movement into a genuine peoples revolution (897).

In looking at the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Jenna Krajeski, uncovered an alternative source important to revolution: art. Krajeski draws out how art, found on both the street and in galleries, was instrumental in mobilizing the masses to form a coherent movement capable of taking down then president, Hosni Mubarak. She notes that “the imagery of the revolution was brutal and engrossing, often very beautiful, and protesters quickly realized its power” to mobilize others and gain support internationally (Krajeski, 28). Commonly found during revolutions are sayings in support of the anti-government movement painted in public areas, such as “enjoy the revolution” written above a metro station in Cairo (Krajeski, 29).

But in the age of the internet larger street murals with similar messages captivate a larger audience than just those who see the pieces in person. Social media has allowed for art that would have only been seen in person to go viral and reach spectators who will subsequently be inspired to join in the fight. Such a phenomena is displayed on what became the Middle East’s largest online art gallery, Arts-Mart. The website, which had a subcategory called “the uprising,” gave Egyptians and regional supporters alike the ability to view and discuss artistic interpretations of the issues surrounding the movement to overthrow the president (Krajeski 31). In other words, social media is capable of disseminating inspirational art that captures the hearts of those who cannot see the work in person, garnering additional support.

In the past decade, social media and its effect on political change has become a growing field of study in the political science community. In the case of the ousting of then president, Joseph Estrada, Shirky found that text messaging gave activists an easy platform to organize a flash protest in the capital city, Manila, during the day of the decision of whether or not to impeach Estrada (28). Similarly, Hirschkind, in analyzing the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, concurred that micro-blogging websites Twitter and Facebook, along with an array of Egyptian blogs were instrumental to the overthrow of the Mubarak regime (61).

From the freest, most democratized nations to the most authoritarian regimes, internet censorship is found in order to curb the information that citizens, or certain groups of citizens (e.g. legal minors) have access to via cyberspace. According to Barney Warf, there are a number of reasons why a government would regulate internet usage, the most oppressive motivations being political repression of dissidents, human rights activists, and/or restricting public criticism of the state (3). Warf claims that attempted censorship motivated by the above-mentioned reasons usually occurs when a government fears the internet’s emancipatory effect (2). Such censorship can be seen in China with the ban on certain social media platforms, such as Facebook (Riley). In another case, during the protests of 2014 the Ukrainian government sent a text message to everyone in the area of the protests reading, “Dear subscriber, you are registered as a participant in a mass riot,” in an attempt to send a chilling effect to citizens so they would not join in the demonstrations (Walker, Grytsenko 2014). Although not necessarily conclusive evidence of the role social media plays in a political society, the fear that it strikes in authoritarian regimes who attempt to combat its possible role as political liberator portrays the real power held by social media.

An increasing reliance on technology on the part of the government and everyday citizens has paved the way for attacks to transcend the traditional physical realm. During revolutions, hacker groups organize in order to make cyber attacks on the distained government. During the 2011 uprising in Egypt, the international hacker collective known as Anonymous unleashed cyber attacks on the Egyptian government in protest of their internet censorship. The group uses “deep web” forums in order to discuss current issues and plot attacks. In order to stand in solidarity with the Egyptian people and prove their seriousness as an actor in the fight for a free internet, Anonymous hacked a multitude of government websites, crashing some and blocking access to others (Anderson 5).

**HYPOTHESIS:**

Governments threatened by the uprisings of oppositional forces turn towards censorship in order to control the information that the general population has access to. Opposition groups attempting to disperse information that the government does not want exposed can easily be silenced when using traditional media sources, but internet sources are more difficult to control. Because social media acts on a non-physical level, but rather a cyber level, it is much more difficult to trace than physical outlets, decreasing the government’s ease of finding the source to silence. Nonetheless, if a government does track and censor the source of unwanted information, other outlets can pop-up instantly containing the same information, due to the near instantaneous speed and low cost of internet publication and platform creation.

Additionally, social media allows *anyone* to publish information, not just those whose profession is to do so, giving rise to the citizen journalist. Since anyone can partake in the publication of information, more people are culpable for the publication of said information, once again increasing the level of difficulty of silencing oppositional publications. A survey by Tufekci and Wilson (2012), in which 1,200 protestors in Tahrir Square days after the disposal of Mubarak, found that 50% of the sample produced and disseminated multi-media content, such as pictures and videos, on social media. This finding, although not conclusive, alludes to the way in which civilian protestors morph into reporters, dispersing images of the demonstrations for those who had not physically attended. When the government covertly detained Wael Ghonim, the founder of one of the most widely followed Facebook pages during the Egyptian Revolution, “We Are All Khaled Said,” they attempted to silence a strong source of anti-Mubarak information. Nonetheless, the feeble attempt proved insufficient as the news of his disappearance spread like wildfire on social media outlets (Hussain, Muzammil M., and Philip N. Howard, 2013). The silencing of one dissident leads to the vocalization of many more, making such an act an inadvertent call to arms by the government. With such a rapid paced stream of information, the government may no longer silence opposition simply by silencing those in charge of large dissident media sources.

Being that social media is digital and the internet can theoretically be accessed from anywhere, it is easier for the opposition to reach those outside of a movement’s nucleus. By reaching geographically diverse groups of opposition, various independent actors can coordinate with each other in order to work together to increase the power of their opposition. Not only are more geographically diverse groups united via social media, but also groups whom have different reasons for opposing the government, such as trade unions or students, activists unite by seeing that although their concerns may differ, the message is the same: oust the tyrannical regime. After the solidification of unique movements, individual demonstrations can be synchronized to create mass demonstrations.

The notion of unification of diverse groups can be seen in the Tunisian Revolution, in which the regime of Ben Ali was taken down. Before the mass movement had started, independent groups had already been expressing their discontent with Ali. Sources such as *Nawaat*, a blog meant to provide a form for public discourse; *A Tusinian Girl*, which focused on speaking up for women’s rights; and the social media following of music journalist turned human rights’ activist, Haythem El Mekki, were some of the first to gain attention for their dissidence (Breuer, Tod Landman, Et. al 2015). By sharing the human rights violations and corruptions of the Ben Ali regime through multi-media, they created a sense of connectedness amongst the communities (Juris 2012). Sources such as these were integral to the next step, where more individuals started to share articles, photos, and videos, amongst other media, that had an aggregate effect of creating a sense of shared grievance amongst all (Hussain, Muzammil M., and Philip N. Howard 2013). The image of Mohammed Bouazizi’s act of self-immolation on the 17th of December of 2011 immediately went into viral circulation on the internet, and that day trade unions, disenfranchised youth, along with human rights activists had joined forces to start a unified movement.

Accompanying the lack of censorship on and expansion of the free flow of information, increased participation is bred in a shorter period of time. Whereas before it may have taken some time to mobilize an individual’s participation, social media has allowed for a quicker recruitment. With social media, “word of mouth” becomes “word of keyboard” so one must not even physically interact with others in order to be persuaded by their arguments and join their cause. Interaction with others via social media creates a situation in which the ability to motivate others is increased and a cause can readily attract support.

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