The Role of Social Media in Arab Revolution
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ABSTRACT
In the light of the Arab uprising, social media was heralded as very important in facilitating the revolution. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world had been traditionally accustomed to subdue and hold sway over traditional media; however, social presented them with a new challenge as they were not able to keep up with the pace in which information was being generated and shared on social media and especially on these two platforms. Despite the successes of social media in organizing the revolution it would be important to point out that beyond the revolution, social media has been very useful in making the very demands of the protesters a political reality. This paper has examined the role of social media in the Arab revolution that stated in 2011 particularly on its role of establishing new political movements or civil society groups.

Keywords: Social media, arab revolution, facebook, twitter, media mobilization

1. INTRODUCTION
Social media is clearly one of the most significant global leaps in human history. Digital media was very important in toppling regimes during the Arab Spring uprising, an indication that social media is indeed a sufficient and necessary condition for social and political activism. The Arab revolution revolved around a networked public of the younger population, and was structurally different from other previous movements spearheaded by a charismatic leader. Above everything, social media (Facebook and Twitter) was very instrumental in maintaining the momentum of protests that stated in Tunisia, and which also toppled two other dictators in Egypt and Libya, and continue to be felt in Syria to date (Lewis, 2011). Social media gave a new source of information that was hard for the regime to control, and was critical in shaping the way citizens made personal decisions about their participation in the protests. An analysis of Facebook and twitter reveals how social media contributed to Arab revolution.

2. THE ROLE OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER
In many of the Arab countries that experienced the revolution, there had been many democracy movements that had for many years deployed many tactics which generally failed to make considerable impact. But it is the new media that made the difference in the Arab revolution, because it completely changed the way the citizenry think about their options. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world had been traditionally accustomed to subdue and hold sway over traditional media; however, Facebook and Twitter presented them with a new challenge as they were not able to keep up with the pace in which information was being generated and shared on social media and especially on these two platforms (Fuchs, 2012). Facebook and Twitter also did more to spread information on the Arab spring outside the Arab countries affected by the revolution, which had a boomerang effect that effectively brought international pressure on those autocratic regimes. Facebook and Twitter were important and influential in media socialization, citizen journalism, and sharing of information and creating of the democratic movements.

2.1 Media Mobilization
One of the defining features of the Arab spring is the relative speed in which it happened. In Egypt for instance, it took a mere 18 days for the aggressive activists to unseat Hosni Mubarak. It took 28 days in Tunisia and 9 months in Libya. Key to the acceleration of events especially in Egypt was the use of social media networks for mobilization and organizational infrastructure which was founded on virtual networks and translated to offline networks (Taki and Coretti, 2013). The activists were able to utilize the strengths of the social networking abilities of both Facebook and Twitter by utilizing on the “many-to-many” communication features of and the rapid speed in which information can be transmitted, an inherent feature of social media. In Egypt for instance, there was a Wael Ghanim group on Facebook called We Are All Khaled Said which was an organizational platform that effectively brought together like-minded individuals, helping them connect a common interest such as commemorating Khaled Said.

The We Are All Khaled soon evolved into a common interest and formed an opposition against the country’s police force, and later became an unstoppable force the eventually unseated Mubarak. During the Arab spring, Facebook and Twitter not only provided the all important organizational infrastructure as part of the mobilization, it also provided a fundamental platform for potential protesters to correspond and share their common grievances and concerns (Bhuyan 2011). Such pages allowed many other activist networks (such as the April 6 movement) to network with one another. Once an individual saw on social network that other people would be taking part in a protest; they were very likely to equally join in. Such was the power of social media in mobilization as witnessed in the Arab revolution. Eventually, through such mobilization, there comes a time when a tipping point occurs and the protest reaches a point where it becomes self-reinforcing. At such a point, the protest or activity thrives and increases in momentum without direct action or organization by its leadership (Taki and Coretti, 2013). In the case of the Arab spring, once a demonstration plan was put in place, word would be spread in offline communities because it was essential to reach much of the Arab population in the respective countries affected.
2.2 Citizen Journalism

With its low entry barriers, social media provides an avenue for alternative press. It provides an easy to access platform that supports citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is the use of digital media to report about an event in real time and on the ground by uploading videos, pictures and texts directly to the internet, or opting to feed the same to a the mainstream media (Taki and Coretti, 2013). Further, the mainstream media as a critical source of information used much of the dialogue that happened through Facebook and Twitter at the height of the Arab spring. Al-Jazeera for instance relied heavily on some reputable bloggers and Twitter users during the revolution for real-time coverage of events.

The media outlet relied on such citizen media platforms like Sharek, which received and sorted through a bountiful of submissions made by citizen journalists. A strategy generally worked when media outlets identified and enlisted key bloggers in the respective countries when the protests were looming and just broke out. These bloggers would act as citizen reporters; the media would later verify the information later on. There are several accuracy issues relating to citizen journalism, however in the case of the Arab revolution, social media allowed individual and groups directly involved in the protest to shape and share their own narrative, thereby exposing themselves to the international audience (Ghannan, 2011). Social media indeed offers a tool for ordinary citizens to document event and tell their experiences. It gave the ordinary citizens during the Arab spring the avenue of collaboration between social media and mainstream media where they were able to get a platform for their own narratives (Lewis, 2011).

2.3 Sharing of the Information Creation of the Democratic Movements

Much has been noted about the role of the internet in generating awareness and sharing of information in the Arab uprising in the Middle East as well as internationally. This forms a perfect example of how movements that were started online eventually became offline movements where they gained the much attention. A poll conducted by the Arab Social Media Report found out that many of the Facebook users agreed that the social networking site was used very effectively to share the information of the causes of the movements in those respective countries (York, 2011). A good example is the Facebook page “We Are All Khaled” which was created for the purpose of this young blogger who was allegedly brutally murdered by the police. The group attracted a whopping 500,000 members in a short span of time, and was used by members to share the graphic photos of the slain blogger around the net.

The creator of the group Wael Ghonim who was a Google executive exploited Facebook’s networking capabilities to spearhead an effective cyberactivism campaign against a repulsive and extremely corrupt country. Sharing of information and creating of the democratic movements fits well with the ideas of cyberactivism because it involves using the net to further a political cause that would prove difficult to carryout offline (Fuchs, 2012). The concept of such activism is usually to create an impactful and emotionally compelling platform that shares information and stories around the issues of injustice; they also interpret history and advance certain political outcomes. Many of such groups as used during the Arab revolution did indeed chart the way for democratic movements as they had political outcomes. The use of Facebook and Twitter for political ends evoked a new consciousness in the Arab region that had political implications due to the networking capabilities of the two social networks (Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013).

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

3.1 Psychological Barriers Were Broken

It has been commonplace for many Arab countries to have fully armed soldiers guarding the national television and radio premises apparently to protect the broadcast assets of those countries from getting commandeered or influenced in the event of attempted mutiny or revolutions. However, this well guarded asset no longer is the prime mode of expressing or disseminating information. Today, the internet has opened a new communication platform when it comes to accessing ideas generated by others and also in terms of personal or individual expression (Bhuiyan, 2011). Like stated the influence of social media became very evident during the Arab revolution, allowing the masses to source, coordinate and schedule large-scale protests and demonstrations.

To a great extent, social media broke the psychological barrier of fear because it helped many to connect and freely share information. In addition, it gave many people in the Arab world the feeling that they were not really alone in such experience, and that there were others who were equally experiencing similar brutalities, injustices and hardships (York, 2011). There is probably nowhere in the world where there have been such distinguished use of social media to promote principles of democracy as visibly as it did in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The social networking cites were used to quickly generate and disseminate information that government couldn’t control or suppress.

3.2 Support from the Side of the International Community (USA/EU)

The Arab revolution presented the USA and EU with real test to their foreign policy. The event a delicate challenge to the entire international community, but especially the two actors as it served as an opportunity to them to regain the credibility they had lost within the Middle East for many years. However, many have criticized the two players for having not come up with an adequate response to the Arab spring. The West was accused frequently of its political indecisiveness, lack of bold initiatives and double standards when it came to dealing with the Arab awakening. During those revolts in the various Arab countries, there was little that international actors could do to contribute to democratic change. However, their support was felt, albeit marginally in freezing assets, issuing travel advisories and bans and probably the most effective, which is issuing oil sanctions.

The one major instance where the western actors got heavily involved in influencing the outcomes the Arab revolution it did not wield the much-expected success.
However, the military intervention in Libya was generally successful. As is the mandate of the UN (which even got the node of the Arab League) NATO has managed to prevent much bloodshed and massages of the civilian population under Gaddafi as he had threatened when the revolution was just beginning. Initially NATO had committed to play a non-partisan role and only get involved in protecting civilians; however, it had to change its strategy faced with a looming military stalemate. It ended up siding with the activists and the rebels matching towards Tripoli where they managed to defeat Gaddafi’s war machine (Lewis, 2011).

4. TWITTER, FACEBOOK AS REAL GUNS

4.1 Comparison of Social Networks with Real Weapons

It is becoming evident now more than ever that many revolutions are being achieved through a serious of consciousness as opposed to through real weaponry. We are now in a period of the most distinguished revolution in human history. It is a revolution characterized by raising consciousness, holding governments and corporations accountable and empowering the masses. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are the hub of this revolution, where real power is now no longer with the wielders of ammunition, but with ordinary people like you who could be readers, bloggers, customers and activists. Thanks to the internet, this revolution is being spread at the speed of broadband connections (Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013).

Today, unlike before, new finding and information can be disseminated to tens of millions of people at the click of a button. The magnitude and speed that such information is spread bypasses the controllers and gatekeepers of mainstream media and more importantly, the political spin doctors. These social networking tools have been used to effectively spark nationwide revolutions (like they did with the Arab Spring) spreading information that cause heightened awareness precipitating action (Ghannan, 2011). The most powerful revolutions are indeed the silent revolutions. These are revolutions that take place when following a buildup of ideas in the minds of the people. These kinds of revolutions are as driven through social media are the real guns; more powerful than bullets and bombs.

4.2 Estimation of its power and importance on the revolutions

In the light of the 2011 Arab uprising, social media was heralded as very important in facilitating the revolution. The use of social media during the Arab spring as a tool for political mobilization has originated a budding dialogue on the place of social media in revolutions (Fuchs, 2012). Many political pundits and academicians have contended that social media is an indispensable force that is here for good. Democracy today is just a tweet away. Liberation is coming to the people through the internet, where it is being seen as an effective weapon for the weak and downtrodden against their authoritarian leaders (Howard, 2011). Social media has indeed become the quintessential conflict of the 20th century; where on one side is an insensitive government’s force firing bullets, while on the other are masses made up of young activists and protesters firing “tweets”. The phrase “Twitter revolutions” was already in use even before the Arab spring (as embraced by the international media). The phrase leads to an impression of a young and tech-savvy generation which is hip who are bent on monopolizing the “digital gap” to unseat their archaic dictatorial rulers (Bhuiyan, 2011).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of social media in the Arab revolution that stated in 2011. There are divergent opinions on the influence that social media had on mobilizing the Arab revolution, and it has been argued in this research that its main roles included providing the necessary organizational infrastructure for mobilization, as an alternative press, or citizen journalism and for generally creating awareness and providing information (locally and globally) necessary about the revolution. Analyzing the manner in which the activists deployed social media tools, one can clearly see the underlying characteristics of social networks that were used to promote the requirements needed for collective action. Nevertheless, despite the successes of social media in organizing the revolution it would be important to point out that beyond the revolution, social media has been very useful in making the very demands of the protesters a political reality. There is need for a further research on the use of social media in the three Arab countries in the post-revolution period particularly on its role of establishing new political movements or civil society groups.

REFERENCES