SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS AND THE ARAB REVOLTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to evaluate the role of social media in Arab revolts. The study argues that social media played a pivotal role in recruiting and mobilizing hesitant participants to get involved in mass action and abandon fear of an autocratic regime and In synchronizing individual's believes and coordinating their actions. They facilitated the crossing of a fear barrier by rallying a large number of people and not just the small group of dedicated dissidents. They strengthened immeasurably civil society and the public sphere in the countries where the authoritarian governments routinely have stifled communication between citizens and power holders.

Key words: Social Media, Arab Revolts, Network Society, Tunisian Revolution, The Global Identity Space.

SOSYAL MEDYA ARAÇLARI VE ARAP BAHARI

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı Arap devrimlerinde sosyal medyanın rolünü analiz etmektir. Sosyal medya devrime taraftar kazandırmış, isteksiz olanları mobilize ederek kitle hareketlerine neden olmuş ve otokratik rejimlerin korkulu rüyası haline gelmiştir. Kitlenin korkularını aşarak, ayaklanmanın küçük bir grupla sınırlı kalmamasını sağlamıştır. Yöneticilerin iletişimi control ettiği bu ülkelerde sosyal medya bu ülklerde sivil toplumu ve kamusal alanı güçlendiremiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sosyal Medya, Arap Devrimleri, Ağ Toplumu, Tunus Devrimi, Küresel Kimlik Alanı.

Social Media Tools and The Arab Revolts

One of the most remarkable and interesting aspects of the 2011 Arab revolts has been the use of social media tools - text messaging, e-mail, video and photo sharing, social networking, and the like - by small groups of activists and a large body of protesters in mobilising, organising, communicating and transmitting these events.

These tools which successfully utilise global identity space are both mechanisms and consequence of the development of probably one of the greatest inventions of the XX century – the internet and the mobile phone. Both have dramatically altered not only the way people communicate but even more importantly the way they relate to communications tools and the manner they use them.

The aim of this article is to provide a short conceptual introduction to some of the critical parameters of the subject matter and their investigative dimensions. Its intention is to offer analytical avenues for intellectual examination of what has clearly become of the most powerful and important socio-political phenomena of contemporary societies.

The evolution of the internet from a limited military use in 1969 by the United States army, to a current indispensable tool for over two billion people world-wide makes it one of the basic instruments of life for almost one-third of world's population.[1] The popularity of the internet is primarily due to its characteristics that distinguish it from other media. Its global reach is clearly mainly due to its interactivity and multi-mediality as well as to the fact that it can flow, almost without constraints, across national borders. Information available on the network are transmitted in all currently known languages. This benefits people representing different cultures, ethnic and national groups. One can therefore say that it is a medium facilitating the breaking down of cultural, national, ideological and/or religious barriers. Any attempt to understand the functioning of contemporary societies requires a careful examination of the role performed in these by the internet and associated social media tools.

Initially, internet communications were mainly based mainly on e-mail, instant messaging, discussion groups and forums. Currently they also encompass the increasingly very popular, virtual communities or online communities, which combine a variety of forms of communication over the network.

Network society

The notion of network society was introduced in 1991 by Jan van Dijk in his book *The Network Society*.[2] He defined the idea of the "network society" as a form of society increasingly organizing its relationships in media networks gradually replacing or complementing the social networks of face-to-face communication. Personal communication is replaced by digital technology. This means that social and media networks are shaping the prime mode of organization and most important structures of modern society. He describes social networking as "individuals creating ties to family members, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, colleagues… and so on."[3] Thus the network society is a society in which a

combination of social and media networks shapes its prime mode of organization and most important structures at all levels (individual, organizational and societal). In other words the network society is a collectivity of people in which interactions take place via the internet and its basic services which enable these interactions include mailing and discussion groups, internet relay chats, internet portals, blogs and others.

These communities have many similar traits that characterize the communities existing in reality. Their main characteristics are: interaction, a sense of identity and belonging, the existence of a common goal, and the generally applicable rules and standards. There is an on-going discussion among social scientists whether these communities can be treated equitably with communities existing in reality? Some argue that the community of this type is a poorer version of real communities. They are devoid of direct interaction with another human being. None of them have "church or place of worship, cafe, gallery, theatre or pub. Lots of contacts between people, but without an ounce of humanity."[4] Communication via the internet cannot replace direct "face to face" relationship.

Other social scientists argue that communication via the network should be treated equally with direct communication. "Virtual space is fast turning into the natural habitat".[5] The only difference is the space in which it takes place. The first occurs in physical space, and the other in cyberspace, which as we know overcomes the physical barriers. In both rules, norms and customs apply. Failure to obey these entails the possibility of exclusion from the community. People affiliated in internet communities extend emotional support to their co-affiliates, give advice and frequently engage in ties that can then be transferred to an existing real world.[6]

This argument is taken a step further by Zygmunt Bauman who contents that communication via the internet outweighs real, direct communication. He presents a series of arguments for the superiority of virtual communication over real communication. First, because of the availability of virtual acquaintances on the internet one always has company. This reduces problems and dangers associated with loneliness. If one loses permanent or temporary contact with a person with whom one communicates via the internet, one always finds other potential candidates for further communication. Thus for example Facebook gives one friends for seven days a week for 24-hours.

In the online world as opposed to the offline world, characterized by having a lesser tendency to promote human happiness, all seem to be ready for immediate response to our call.[7]

Secondly, online contacts with other people are devoid of any obligations. None of them talk about "burdensome and unwanted necessities associated with contacts outside the network."[8] Communication via the internet often takes place without having to make commitments on our part to keep it. There is little risk of having rows and forceful disagreements. If someone does not respond to us, just a mouse move and we are somewhere else.

Bauman's arguments about the superiority of virtual over real communication appear to be supported by results of empirical findings concerning the behaviour of American teenagers. They show that 75 per cent of those studied spend any available free time on the internet, mainly on social networking sites such as Facebook.[9] The increasing popularity of virtual communication is also changing the traditional model of family functioning. Research conducted in the United States shows that twenty years ago 60 per cent of American families gathered regularly at a joint dinner. Today the figure is 20 per cent.[10]

Network Society and Social Ties

As in the earlier stages of social development, network society, has, not unexpectedly, produced entirely new types of social ties, which form the basis of collective life. The classical German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, argued that society divides between two types of social groups. The first *Gemeinschaft* - or community, based on close-knit group united by bonds of blood, soil, tradition, communal ties in which the bond was derived from a sense of brotherhood, family or neighbourhood, was "natural" and therefore "organic". The second, *Gesellschaft* - an association in which the bonds are of a formal, rational character is not natural but a product of man-made conventions.[11]

In the network society we are dealing with completely new types of bonds. They are less subject to spatiality than those suggested by Ferdinand Tönnies or by analogous typology proposed by Emile Durkheim who distinguished society based on "mechanical" solidarity and "organic" solidarity.[12]

Communal space ceases to be a precondition for the emergence of social ties in the network society as they may exist in virtual reality by creating virtual communities. In this context the question arises as to whether they can be considered as "ordinary" ties, or rather as virtual ties forming virtual reality. A typology of social ties provided by the Polish sociologist Paweł Rybicki, offers a useful avenue to address this question. Rybicki suggests that social ties: "…manifest themselves on two planes. One constitutes substantially defined cohesions and relationships between people: communalities and blood relationships, territory of origin,

language, culture in its different aspects, and also the organization of collective life. The second plane represents specific state and acts of consciousness: a sense of union with other human beings mutual dependence on them, and the manifestations of this feeling in attitudes, behaviour, and either individual or collective activities."[13]

Thus the Rybicki typology offers two aspects of social ties. The first relates to everything that can be observed from the outside. The second one concerns the consciousness on the basis of which the unification with people within a particular ambit takes place.

Virtual bonds are created in virtual reality and are the basis of network society with several specific attributes that cannot exist in the real world. The first is a-spatiality. While in the case of real communities the most common point of reference is their physical borders, the action in the virtual world is not limited territorially. The second concerns a-synchronicity. Communication does not need to run in real time while communication that runs in real communities requires the presence of the participants in the same place and time. Another attribute is associated with a-corporeality. In virtual communities the key is text. The fourth attribute is associated with a-stigmatism. Communication is based mainly on a text free from stigma – aspects such as background characteristics, gender, physical appearance, race etc. have secondary importance. All of these attributes significantly affect anonymity. Since virtual communication lacks physical contact between sender and receiver there is no certainty who is on the other side of the screen.[14]

Network society and Political action

There is ample empirical and inferred evidence of the growing importance of network society for the individual who increasingly seeks and receives support for a variety of aspects of his/hers daily existence. For us, however, the important question is the role of network society in political action.

One of the earliest examples of the effects of network society on modern group dynamics is cited by Clay Shirky in his article the political power of social media.[15] He describes events in Manila. On 17 January, 2001, during the impeachment trial of the President of the Philippines, Joseph Estrada, his supporters in the Philippine Congress voted to set aside key evidence against him. Less than two hours after the decision was announced, thousands of Filipinos, angry that their corrupt president might be let off the hook, converged on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a major crossroads in Manila. The protest was arranged, in part, by forwarded text messages reading, "Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk." The crowd quickly

swelled, and in the next few days, over a million people arrived, choking traffic in downtown Manila.

The public's ability to coordinate such a massive and rapid response - close to seven million text messages were sent that week - so alarmed the country's legislators that they reversed course and allowed the evidence to be presented. Estrada's fate was sealed; by 20 January, he was gone. The event marked the first time that social media had helped force out a national leader. Estrada himself blamed "the text-messaging generation" for his downfall.[16]

The Philippine tactic has been subsequently used several times elsewhere – often with desired effects. Two examples are particularly interesting in the context of our analysis. On 11 March 2004, three days before parliamentary elections in Spain, a series of coordinated bombings against commuter trains took place in Madrid, killing 191 people and injuring 1,800. The Spanish government of Jose Maria Aznar and the ruling Popular Party (PP), claimed evidence indicating that the Basque separatist organization ETA was responsible for the bombings. Such claims were generally thought favorable to the PP's chances of being re-elected. However, within hours of the bombings evidence emerged suggesting that a jihadist cell inspired by al-Qaeda was responsible for the atrocities. Many on the opposition site believed that al-Qaeda targeted Spain because of prime minister Jose Maria Aznar's support of the war in Iraq, and that Aznar was downplaying the role of al-Qaeda in an effort to improve his party's chance in the election. Mass demonstrations organized by text messaging followed. Spain has an official ban on political demonstrations in the 24 hours prior to any election. Activists and concerned citizens ignored the ban and gathered anyway. By 11 p.m. on 13 March more than 10,000 people had congregated in front of the PP headquarters in Madrid.[17] The text messaging campaign increased in volume. While 13 March saw a 20 per cent increase in text messages; 14 March, election day, saw a rise of 40 per cent.[18] The text messages contained simple but effectively instructive texts: "The government lied. Pass it on," "We want to know before we vote," "Today at 18 at PP Genova no political signs demanding truthful information pass it on," and "Information poisoning at 18:00 PP pass it on."[19] The tactics proved successful. Jose Maria Aznar and the Popular Party lost the general elections to the Socialist Party. "This was the first time when the results of a national election could be ultimately traced to the activity of a minority of well-connected individuals, which originated a snowball effect: the alpha-users and their communities arrived in politics."[20]

Another interesting example of the impact of network society concerns Moldova. In parliamentary elections held on 5 April 2009, the incumbent Communist Party of Moldova claimed to have won 49.48 per cent of the vote, which guaranteed them 60 seats in

parliament. The victory for the communist was larger than expected and arose suspicion not only among opposition parties but also civil society activists. A day after the elections when preliminary results were announced, six of them met in a café in Moldova's capital, Chisinau. "We discussed what we should do about the previous day's parliamentary elections, which we were sure had been rigged… We decided to organise a flash mob for the same day using Twitter, as well as networking sites like Facebook and SMS."[21] The messages spread quickly as the senders asked everyone to forward them to all the people they knew. With no recent history of mass protests in Moldova, "we expected at the most a couple of hundred friends, friends of friends, and colleagues… When we went to the square, there were 15,000 people waiting there. It was unbelievable."[22] The authorities were taken by surprise by the sudden appearance of thousands of protestors in front of Moldova's parliament building. There were no speeches, no declarations or no written official demands. A huge mass of people stood between the parliament house and the president's building, which faces one another, for hours and waited for the authorities to respond.[23]

The demonstrations continued peacefully into the following day. But on 7 April, with no response from the government, protesters swept police aside to storm the parliament building and the presidential palace opposite. Fire broke out in one wing of the parliament, and the young protesters vented their fury by wrecking computers and office furniture. The police routed the remaining crowds in the main square and arrested some 200 people. While the so-called 'Twitter revolution' ended in repression it forced Moldova's president, Vladimir Voronin, to order recount of the vote. The result of the election was not changed through the recount, as no serious errors were determined.[24]

The Moldovan case is a significant example of a close co-relationship between network society and action call against political regimes under social stress. At a time when there is a decrease in the level of social acceptance for authority (and consequently a decrease in the level of its legitimacy), and the society itself seems to be tired of the regime, access to social media (assuming that their contents are not controlled or even blocked by the authority) not only provides an important platform for exchange of views between those who oppose authoritarian power, but is also a central imperative of social mobilization.

As one of the Moldovan activists put it: "Not only did we underestimate the power of Twitter and the internet, we also underestimated the explosive anger among young people at the government's policies and electoral fraud."[25]

Social networks played a very important role in organizing protests against the Alexander Lukashenko regime in Belarus. Every Wednesday since late May 2011, thousands

of people have come out onto the main squares of Belarusian cities, responding to rallying calls spread via Facebook and its Russian-language version Vkontakte. The silent gatherings break all the rules of previous opposition rallies. There are no organisers to arrest. And, unlike in the past, they are everywhere, not only in the capital. The protesters walk or stand silently and every two or three minutes just clap. The internet-organised marches are known as "Revolution by Social Networks".[26] In anticipation of protests during Independence Day celebrations on 3 July 2011, the authorities blocked access to Facebook, Twitter and a major Russian social networking site, but about 700 or 800 people gathered anyway on a central square in Minsk and clapped their hands in unison to show their opposition to president Alexander Lukashenko.

The global identity space

The Arab revolt famously began when Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi, a poor and desperate young man, harassed by the authorities, set fire to himself in SidiBouzid, inspiring a revolution that brought down the country's dictator, which in turn inspired protest movements across the Middle East.[27] Mohamed Bouazizi was not the first Tunisian to set fire to himself. Abdesslem Trimech, a street vendor, set himself on fire in the provincial town of Monastir on 3 March 2010 in protest against local government hindrance of his work. But not many people knew of his action. Bouazizi burned to death in front of a camera. The photos of his self-immolation were posted on Facebook and aroused a powerful set of emotions not only in Tunisia but also around the world. In contrast Trimach died in obscurity.

While the protest movement in Egypt was considered inspired by the Tunisian revolution discontent had been simmering for some time and a spark that helped to light the fuse was the death of Khaled Said.[28] The 29-year-old was allegedly beaten to death by two policemen after he posted an online video of local police officers apparently dividing up the spoils of a drug haul. Graphic photos of Said's injuries circulated online and became a rallying cause for activists opposed to Egypt's 29-year-old emergency law. Within weeks "We are all Khaled Said" Facebook page has more than 130,000 followers. By the beginning of February 2011, it had over 473,000. The number subsequently rose to over 773,000 followers, with hundreds of photos and over 60 videos. Although it is impossible to quantify how much Said's death or the Facebook page galvanized the protesters, by the account of one Egyptian protester, "[Khaled Said] is a big part of our revolution."[29]

The brutal death of Hamza al-Khatib, age 13, tortured and killed by the Syrian security forces in May 2011, now being seen as a symbol of revolution in that country, raises parallels

with other people in the Middle East who fell victim to state-sponsored brutality and whose fate rallied protest movements in their respective countries. The "We are Hamza" Facebook page has more than 250,000 followers.[30]

The key aspect of making the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, the murder of Khaled Said, or the brutal killing of Hamza al-Khatib, known to the people outside their towns, and posting it on social media sites was a determined action of a handful of highly dedicated individuals. These activists were not merely observers of what was happening around them but architects of social action on a much larger scale. They understood the importance of the events they were recording on the mobile phones and the necessity to get it out to the outside world via Facebook, YouTube and other sites. This determined political action based on a fusion of personal grievances and political struggles against the autocratic rulers and their henchmen was fundamentally important to the success of the Arab spring in Tunisia and Egypt and the spread of the revolt to other Arab countries - Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Social media proved critical at a time when everything was censored. Above all it supplied the avenues to communicate. Social media gave the marginalized a voice. It galvanized strangers and gave them the dates and locations of protests.

The impact of social media on the developments in the Arab countries has been that it supplied information, graphic images, facts and dates, coordinated their actions, and especially support for actions of civil society of which it has become an integral part. In the long-run these developments have strengthen the goals of civil society in countries where traditionally civic society and public sphere are very weak. The power relations between the state and civil society in the Arab region have been substantially shifted partially due to the impact of global identity space on these revolts.

One area that, so far, has received only limited attention in the analysis of the impact of social media on the Arab revolts is the effect and sway of the Doha-based television network Al Jazeera on the Arab revolts. The network has been a big change in the region, certainly the first critical media that we have seen in that part of the world. There can be little doubt that Al Jazeera has been a critical factor that has ensured that social media has maintained a high profile in these uprisings. The network regularly broadcasted material smuggled out via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This meant that videos have often been broadcast back to the country of origin. But it is also clear that Al-Jazeera was not the medium that would allow protesters to coordinate their actions. So one of the open research questions is: how much has Al-Jazeera helped everybody to understand what is going on, and how much did social media help people to coordinate their actions? To what degree the twin

effect of the presence of Al-Jazeera plus social tools for synchronizing beliefs and coordinating actions matter?

Conclusions

In the Arab revolt social media played a pivotal role in recruiting and mobilizing hesitant participants to get involved in mass action and abandon fear of an autocratic regime. In synchronizing individual's believes and coordinating their actions. They facilitated the crossing of a fear barrier by rallying a large number of people and not just the small group of dedicated dissidents. They strengthened immeasurably civil society and the public sphere in the countries where the authoritarian governments routinely have stifled communication between citizens and power holders.

Moreover this process also involved the acceptance of the value of the individual and social dignity and the rejection of a material deal with the autocratic regime. Social media made it possible for the visible enlargement of the participatory pool of discontent and quality of the revolts dependent on quantity – the mass of participants.

After the "Arab Spring" surprised the world with the power of technology to revolutionize political dissent, governments are racing to develop strategies to respond to, and even control, the new player in the political arena - social media.[31] Anti-government protests in the Arab states of north Africa and the Middle East served as a wake-up call to those in authority. By allowing millions of citizens to coordinate political action quickly and often without conventional leadership, the new technology is challenging traditional political power structures.

Clay Shirky suggests that: "For political movements, one of the main forms of coordination is what the military calls 'shared awareness' the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too. Social media increase shared awareness by propagating messages through social networks".[32] The anti-Estrada call in Manila, the anti-communist demonstrations in Moldova, and the anti-Aznar protests in Spain, gained momentum so quickly precisely because the millions of people spreading the message were not part of a hierarchical organisation.

Political repression, economic crises and the widening wealth gap in many countries could all further fuel the growth in social media-fed protest. "The question for governments is what responses might prove effective and acceptable. So complex and fast moving are modern systems, some experts suspect, that any attempts at censorship or shutdowns will simply be circumvented or overwhelmed."[33]When Mubarak tried to control the open flowof

online and mobile information by blocking Twitter and Facebook, people managed to access the services through their mobile phones and turned to third-party applications like Hoot suite and Tweet Deck to tweet.

It is, however, also worth pointing out that many of authoritarian regimes have wised-up and begun using the social media for their own ends. At the beginning of October 2011 messages on Egypt mobile networks appeared calling on people to support President Hosni Mubarak and attend pro-Mubarak rallies. These messages were sent and received despite an existing block on normal SMS. In the middle of March 2011 anonymous text messages carrying dire warnings of huge fines, loss of nationality and expulsion from the country were sent in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia.

In its 2011 Annual Report, Amnesty International stated that "governments are scrambling to regain the initiative or to use this [social media] technology against activists."It cited instances in countries including China, Egypt and Syria where bloggers have been arrested.[34]

A documentary on Al-Jazeera English detailing the violent crackdown on dissidents in Bahrain reported the apparent use by the Bahraini authorities of Facebook to identify those protesters to be identified, with one thread inviting visitors to "write the traitor's name and work place and let the government do the rest".[35]

The Arab revolts apart from the immense significance for the development of civil society and public sphere in the countries of north Africa and the Middle East, have also opened a new chapter in the socio-political importance of social media and their effect on the global identity space.

END NOTES

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America/Caribbean - 10.3%; Africa - 5.7%; Middle East - 3.3%; Oceania/Australia - 1.0%. (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm).

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