

NEW SOCIAL MEDIA'S POWER IN A POST-MODERN WORLD

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In early 2011, the whole world witnessed the role played by new social media, especially mobile phones and social network websites, in rapid-fire political events which have toppled many authoritarian leaders in Arab countries. In such context, it is not surprising when many people, including researchers and academics, thought that new social media such as Twitter and Facebook are alternately able to cause political revolutions and breakthrough authoritarian regimes, bringing democracy and new freedom of expression for citizens, and socially, they provide new forms of identities and communities. Though this controversial topic surely needs more time to be proved before a consensus can be reached by researchers, it is possible to assert that new social media are not the direct *cause* of political revolution. However, they provide an effective platform for disseminating revolutionary information and ideas quickly. They also do serve as a tool to facilitate political, social and cultural advancements.

Definitions of terms

First of all, it is necessary to understand exactly the related concepts, namely

“social media,” “political revolutions,” “authoritarian regimes,” and “democracy.”

Anthony J. Bradley (blogs.gartner.com, 2010) defines *social media* as “a set of technologies and channels targeted at forming and enabling a potentially massive community of participants to productively collaborate.” According to him, social-media technologies, such as social networking, wikis and blogs, enable collaboration on a much grander scale and support tapping the power of the collective in ways previously unachievable.

Searching the term “*political revolution*” on Wikipedia, the result reads “a political revolution, in the Trotskyist theory, is an upheaval in which the government is replaced, or the form of government altered, but in which property relations are predominantly left intact.” In Peter Calvert (1970) defines ‘political revolution’ as “a complete overthrow of the established government of a country or state by those who were

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previously subject to it; a forcible substitution of a new ruler or form of government.” In short, such an event is a fundamental change in political organization, or in a government or constitution; the overthrow or renunciation of one government, and the substitution of another, by the governed. [1913 Webster]

Authoritarianism is a form of social organization characterized by submission to authority. In politics, an *authoritarian regime* is a government in which political power, usually exclusive, unaccountable, and arbitrary, is concentrated in a leader(s), typically unelected by the people. Authoritarianism emphasizes the rule of man over the rule of law, it includes election rigging, political decisions being made by a bureaucracy that operates independently of rules. Authoritarianism also embraces the informal and unregulated exercise of political power, the arbitrary deprivation of civil liberties, and little tolerance for meaningful opposition. Authoritarianism is marked by "indefinite political tenure" of the ruler or ruling party (often in a single-party state) or other authority.

Absolutely, authoritarian regimes are opposite to *democracy*. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) defined democracy as “Government of the people, by the people, for the people”. In its general meaning, democracy is a form of government, where a constitution guarantees basic personal and political rights, fair and free elections, and independent courts of law. In order to deserve the label ‘modern

democracy,’ a country needs to fulfil some basic requirements which must be kept up in daily life by politicians and authorities: Guarantee of basic human rights to every individual person; separation of powers between the state institutions; freedom of opinion, speech, press and mass media; religious liberty; general and equal right to vote; and good governance (focus on public interest and absence of corruption).

Social media and post-modern politics

Since the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s, social media have become an indispensable part of life for civil society worldwide (Shirky, 2011). As asserted by Pierre de La Saussay (socialiving.wordpress.com, 2010), these *media are often seen as a new means of struggle against abuse of power*, since they constitute powerful communication tools that activists can easily access and control in order to broadcast instantly and widely whatever they want. It is through interconnected social media like cell phones, Twitter and Facebook, “the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (Shirky, op. cit.). This is the new way for political interaction with the masses and has allowed a more open discussion about politics between people (Callard, 11 March 2011).

Take for example the recent political events in the Arab world. Evidently, social media are the defining factor in the rapidity with which revolutionary fervour has spread like a virus from

Tunisia Egypt, to Yemen, Jordan and Syria (jonathanlea.com, 2011). Protests have been organised and publicised by individuals through Facebook, Twitter and SMS. Most of the Egyptian protestors were invited through Facebook and the site, together with others, was used to reach out to frustrated young activists and encourage them to be part of the January protest. As Hinh Tran (1 February 2011) writes on *Berkeley Political Review*, technology “can clearly help catalyse idealistic students, intellectuals and an angry, oppressed population into action by allowing them to organise and exchange ideas online.” According to Ahmed Bekh (27 February 2011), an Egyptian student in the United States, it was such well organized, social and internet-coordinated groups like *We are all Khaled Said* and *April 6 Youth Movement* that spread information about self-immolation in Egypt to the public, attracted hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life and played a prominent role in bringing worldwide attention to the situations. Greg Satell (9 February 2011) in his post on social media and revolution summarises the importance of social media most succinctly in stating that political movements are manifestly influenced by networks and therefore accelerated by social media.

The next point is that *social media become a new tool for disseminating information about democracy and changes the powers governments have* (Hsu Yung-ming, 5 March 2011; Jonathan Lea, op. cit.). With sites such

as Wikileaks bringing about the end of state censorship and sites such as Facebook and Twitter allowing masses of people to easily share ideas and organise themselves, Lea emphasizes, “broadly distributed internet tools and the spirit of informed and confident tech savvy people mean that populations can no longer be so easily repressed.” Meanwhile, Hsu mentions social media as “a bottom-up way of disseminating information about democracy”. When the strength of mainstream media in controlling politics is weakening and the communicative and dissemination forces of new forms of media like Facebook and YouTube are growing, says the assistant research fellow at the Sun Yat-sen Institute for Social Sciences and Philosophy at Academia Sinica, politicians now have no choice but to get used to the “wilder” side of democracy that these forms of media embody. For example, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has to go online and conduct discussions with netizens, and Taiwan’s President Ma Ying-jeou has set up a Facebook account. Hsu concluded that “They have done this because they have seen that new media forms are a tipping point for politicians” and that “those in power are using such media not just to win people over, but because these are the new rules dictated by new media.”

Another political point is that *new social media can help to raise awareness of issues around the globe, thus increasing global attention and sense of responsibility*. Brian Solis (5 February 2011), one of the most prominent thought leaders and published authors in

new media, maintains that the current information (r)evolution that the people are experiencing at varying depths globally is “less about the technology” but “more about sociology.”

In the past, the only way to know about revolutions happening somewhere in the world was to hear reports on the radio or watch breaking news on television. Now, however, new social media turned mass audiences, once passive, into interactive/participative users (Livingstone, 2003). The audiences no longer just receive information from social media but they also share pictures, post video clips, and give comments on the events. Interestingly, this is happening not only in a certain part of the world but globally. In fact, the 2011 Egyptian protests captured worldwide attention in part thanks to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms which empowered activists and onlookers to communicate, coordinate, and document the events as they occur. Solidarity protests took place in many countries in support of the Egyptians. And when the Egyptian government tried to limit Internet access, there was hacktivism with global groups attempting to provide alternative communication methods for the Egyptians. Ahmed Bekh (op. cit.) recalls that he found himself “completely glued to” his computer during the 2011 Egyptian revolution. After the internet was shut down, he felt it was his “duty to mediate the revolution to the rest of the world” and started posting news and videos on

Facebook and Twitter. Shortly afterwards, he realised that there were many people, Egyptians and non-Egyptians, doing the same things: organizing demonstrations in solidarity with the people in Egypt, circulating articles, videos and photos of the revolution to get the news out to the world.

However, sceptical advocates assert that “it is hard to see social media as a way to really start a revolution” (Callard, 11 March 2011; Hudson, 19 March 2011; Ingram, 29 January 2011). There must first be some underlying causes and dissatisfaction, only then new social media become helpful. In the case of the Egyptian revolution, according to Callard, “social media provided a platform for protestors to organize and spread the word”, but the actual groundwork consisted of Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian regime and inheritance of power, emergency law which led to the imprisonment of activists without trials, undocumented hidden detention facilities, police brutality, corruption in government elections and among government officials, restrictions on free speech and press, demographic and economic challenges (unemployment, reliance on subsidized goods, poverty, inequality, social exclusion). All of these factors contributed to the overall cause of social dissidence that sparked the political revolution. So, as agreed by sociologist Mark A. Shields from Işık University (13 March 2011), “let’s give the new media their proper credit, but let’s also not lose sight of the whole bundle of

predisposing political, social and economic causes.”

The presence of new social media in political events is not sufficient to name them as the cause. This can be proved by various revolutions having taken place throughout history, without cell phones, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube or Flickr: the War of Independence in America (1775), the French bourgeois revolution (1789), the Russian Bolshevik Revolution (1917), the August 1945 Revolution in Vietnam, China's Xinhai Revolution (1911) and War of Liberation (1949), and others. Most of these revolutions took place before Twitter, Facebook or even TV for that matter (Mitra, 6 March 2011). Jillian York of Global Voices Online (14 January 2011) even believes that “social media tools are useful, but not necessary” because the revolution [in Tunisia for instance] “would have happened without the Internet.”

In short, technology, no matter how useful, can hardly “cause” a political revolution. Instead, the new technologies are merely important tools for getting people onto the streets. Thus, it “need to be careful about associating tools with causes” (Ewan McEoin, as quoted by Abby Callard, op. cit.) and to suggest that social media are an underlying cause of the protests “is to ignore what fuelled popular anger in the first place”: poor governance (Shields, op cit.).

Social media change public behaviour and society

It is undeniable that *new social media are changing “our behaviour and*

society” (Solis, op. cit.) through creating dense networks that extend connections and interactions among their users in society. Facebook, with more than 600 million active users as of January 2011, allows its users to easily add other users as friends, exchange messages, and join common interest user groups. Its average user has 130 friends and is connected to 80 community pages, groups and events. The site boasts for over 900 million objects that people interact with (pages, groups, events and community pages) and more than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums) shared monthly (Facebook, 2011). <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Facebook&action=edit>. Meanwhile, Twitter, “the best way to discover what’s new in your world”, is estimated to have 200 million users, generating 65 million tweets a day and handling over 800,000 search queries daily (Twitter, 2011). A noticeable example for how social media have changed the way people feel, think and act is U.S. President Barack Obama’s election campaign in 2008. The campaign used interactive Web 2.0 tools, including YouTube and Facebook, to organize supporters, advertise to voters, defend against attacks and communicate with constituents. The campaign’s official stuff created for YouTube was watched for 14.5 million hours while 6.7 million people watched Mr. Obama’s 37-minute speech on race on YouTube (Miller, 7 November 2008). “Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president,” said Arianna Huffington, Editor in chief of *The Huffington Post*, as cited by Miller.

Secondly, *social media's ability to quickly disseminate information at low cost facilitates social activities*. Shirky (2011) points out that digital social media "have acted as a massive positive supply shock to the cost and spread of information, to the ease and range of public speech by citizens, and to the speed and scale of group coordination." Equipped with features that enable users to be increasingly interactive and collaborative, social media endow the audience access to on-demand content and the ability to share and discuss it with others instantly. In the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, images, videos and messages of the disaster appeared on Facebook and Youtube just minutes after the first wave of tsunami hit Sendai. Afterward, these sites continued to play a considerable role during the relief and fund-raising campaigns. Tens of thousands of people worldwide engaged in sharing sympathy, condolence and support for Japan through social network websites. In addition, people could also donate to the Red Cross by sending text messages on mobile phones, and the donation being added to phone bills.

Especially, in the recent time, *social media have become an effective tool for fund raising activities*. The *Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report*, released in April 2010 by the Nonprofit Technology Network, shows that nonprofits continued to increase their use of commercial social networks over 2009 and early 2010, with Facebook (86%), Twitter (60%), YouTube (48.1%) and LinkedIn (33.1%). Similar

to the abovementioned case of Japan's tsunami, relief efforts for Haiti after a devastating earthquake in January 2010 was supported by sending text messages. In 48 hours, the American Red Cross sought to raise 3 million USD largely with the help of 2.3 million Twitter messages posted by Red Cross supporters (Flandez, 31 October 2010).

Unfortunately, apart from the convenience and positive changes brought about in social life, the advent of new social media has also raised increasing concerns about the negative effects of those devices on vulnerable groups, especially young people. The youth's misuse of new social media for illicit purposes, such as sexting, cyberprostitution and cyberbullying, has become alarmingly popular worldwide.

Sexting involves taking pictures of oneself alone or with others in a 'sexy pose', engaging in intimate behaviour, or exposing a body part. The photos, taken with a mobile phone or webcams, are then distributed to peers or even a global audience by posting them on a social network site. Meanwhile, cyberbullying has been defined as "the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others" (<http://www.cyberbullying.org>) or "when teens use the Internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person" (National Crime Prevention Council, 2011).

In 2007, Debbie Heimowitz from Stanford University worked in focus groups for ten weeks in three different schools to learn about cyber-bullying in Northern California (US). The findings determine that over 60% of students had been cyber-bullied and were victims of cyber-bullying. A study by Campbell (2005) finds that over 25% of the 120 eighth grade students in Brisbane (Australia) who were surveyed knew someone who had been bullied by a technological means, 11% revealed they had engaged in cyberbullying, and 14% said they had been targeted, most often by text messages. In terms of sexting, in a 2008 survey of 1,280 teenagers and young adults of both sexes on Cosmogirl.com sponsored by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (2008), 20% of teens (ages 13-19) and 33% of young adults (ages 20-26) had electronically sent/posted their own nude or semi-nude photos.

Social media bring about cultural advancements?

As stated by Goggin (2006), a bewildering and proliferating range of cultural activities revolve around new social media (cell phone, mobile technologies, and wireless networks): staying in constant contact, text messaging, fashion, identity-construction, music, mundane daily work routines, remote parenting, interacting with TV programs, watching video, surfing the Internet, meeting new people, dating, flirting, loving, bullying, mobile commerce, and locating people. In business and marketing world, Erik

Qualman (2010) puts in a nutshell numerous interesting facts behind the transformation affected by new social media, including Nielsen Global Online survey in 2009, which revealed that recommendations posted by consumers online were one of the most trusted sources of advertising.

And the most noteworthy characteristic of new social media is that they *allow users to become content producers*. The once-to-be-passive readers, listeners and viewers can now engage in *produsage* - the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement. Now, in collaborative communities, shared content is created in a networked, participatory environment which enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge - frequently in a hybrid role of *producer* (Bruns, 2008).

Furthermore, as pointed out by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), the effects of (social) media messages can influence people's needs or psychological and social characteristics as well as alter the nature of the societal system itself. They assure that "behavioural alteration effects... may take the form of massive protest which not only gets people involved in producing a new series of events to be covered by the media, but may also increase the level of societal conflict, alter societal norms, or create new social groups."

However, on a darker side, among other things, social web sites and mobile phones are accused of "fostering less

intimate forms of contact that in effect undercut our ability to develop the ties that bind and keep us together.” And it seems that technology is turning young people into an electronic herd of social recluses – that is, a generation that prefers interacting with a computer, mobile phone, or gaming screen rather than a person face-to-face (Watkins, 2009, pp. 51-52). While the online media can give more information quicker, they also take away the physical space, namely face-to-face meetings which are very important physical momentum as an engine for many activities (McCarthy, 1 July 2009).

Regarding the second part of the topic, *do new social media bring democracy and new freedom of expression for citizens, especially those taking part in revolutions against their government, and provide new forms of identities and communities?* The answer may be NO.

In fact, social media is a double-edged technology. Pierre de La Saussay (29 October 2010) argues that the *technology does not improve democracy nor the idea of democracy* because authoritarian states can use the Internet to monitor public opinion. During the protests in Iran that ensued the controversial reelection of Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2009, protesters used social media (mostly Twitter) to bypass censorship and relay information on the movement. At the same time, the Iranian state utilized social media to track the leaders of the opposition. Traditionally, many Arab regimes have used repressive means ranging from massive torture, to the complete control of the press, the

banning of the opposition, the diffusion of a culture of fear through the extensive presence of secret services, the encouragement of reporting on others, etc. Beyond the Arab world, China, now with more than 420 million Internet users, has implemented the world's most thorough Internet censorship and control regime. (Shields, op. cit.). Since late 2010, censorship has prevented Google searches of the English word “freedom.” And most recently, the Jasmine Revolution, a call for democracy, has seen the word “Jasmine” banned from online forums. While foreign correspondents face the visa revocation if they continue to report on the demonstrations, numerous Chinese human right activists have been detained or imprisoned without reasons.

In fact, although the internet can lead to things like improved mobilization, those improvements will *not necessarily lead to an increase in political freedom or democratic structure* (Morozov, 14 January 2011) and not every political movement that uses these tools will succeed (Shirky, 2011). The reason is that, as Shirky notices, the authoritarian states are shutting down their communications grids to deny dissidents the ability to coordinate in real time and broadcast documentation of an event. Besides, in many cases, governments have not lost the power to react. They can still benefit themselves with increasingly sophisticated means of interdiction, surveillance, regulation, propaganda, and censorship. This argument is also accepted by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas (2001):

Aware of potential challenges arising from Internet use in different areas - the mass public, civil society, the economy, and the international community, the authoritarian states will likely respond with a variety of reactive measures: restricting Internet access, filtering content, monitoring online behaviour, or even prohibiting Internet use entirely. In addition, such states seek to extend central control through proactive strategies, guiding the development of the medium to promote their own interests and priorities.

Finally, *no new identity or community is provided by new social media*. Actually, people just try to adapt their true identities, or biological, physiological and genetic make-ups as defined according to essentialist theory, to place themselves in the digital world. Every user's Facebook and Twitter profile features the same layout. A user simply inserts their information into these templates to display, compare and connect socially with others, so creating no community but a network. They try to create the digital representation of their selves based on a variety of taste performances - where we click like for things we like, join groups that interest us, and attend online and offline events.

In *Handbook of new media*, Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2006) suggest two key elements to the idea of a community - Primary and Secondary relationships. Internet communities are only made up of secondary relationships where people know each other in a single or a few dimensions; whereas primary relationships people know each other in multiple dimensions. Therefore,

this is not so much the creation of a community but a global network that is based on interaction, textual and visual representation and performance.

Challenges for new social media's future

Apart from the censorship imposed by authoritarian governments, new social media may face some challenges. In late March 2011, Facebook and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, were sued for one billion dollars over a controversial group page calling for a Third Intifada. Thousands of site users had requested both personally and online through Facebook that site administrators take down what was described as a violence-inciting, anti-Semitic page. The page was eventually shut down upon the conclusion that it breached Facebook policy.

This incident may signal the future that new social media platforms face when considering the ideas of democracy, freedom of expression and e-dissidence. As warned by Sana (op. cit.), in the coming years, internet service providers (ISPs) and social media websites will face the great challenge of either cooperating with authoritarian governments or encouraging political dissidence. Facebook has proven to be increasingly willing to cooperate with governments; its privacy policy has many loopholes, leaving activists often at risk. Twitter, on the other hand, has shown a particular commitment to its users with a strong policy of user confidentiality.

Conclusion

Obviously, new social media have considerably contributed to socio-

political and cultural changes/advancements. They facilitate the compilation of new strategies, raise awareness of issues around the globe, increase attention and sense of responsibility, challenge governments to regulate social media, facilitate social activities, and change behavioural habits. Social media's real potential, as Shirky (op. cit.) states, lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere which will produce significant changes in the future. Access to information is not the primary way social media constrain autocratic rulers or benefit citizens of a democracy. Securing the freedom of personal and social communication among a state's population should be the highest priority, closely followed by securing individual citizens' ability to speak in public. This reordering would reflect the reality that it is a strong civil society--one in which citizens have freedom of assembly, rather than access to Google or YouTube, that does the most to force governments to serve their citizens (Shirky, op. cit.). Thus, to assess the political power of the Internet, suggested by Morozov, it is necessary to consider how it empowers the government via surveillance, how it disempowers citizens via entertainment, how it transforms the nature of dissent by shifting it into a more virtual realm, how it enables governments to produce better and more effective propaganda, and so forth.

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