

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRACY – A COMPARATIVE VIEW: EGYPT, TUNISIA AND TURKEY

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This paper focuses on the role of the Internet and social media in promoting citizens' resistance during the Arab Spring. Specifically, it analyzes the dynamic between technology and social change in light of case studies – the revolutions in Egypt (2011), Tunisia (2010-11) and Turkey (2013). Using a well-established theoretical framework and empirical evidence, the paper suggests that social media is a critical factor for collaborative action, albeit not an exclusive one.

Theories on the social and political functioning of technology are diverse. While most schools of thought acknowledge the close link between technology, politics and social activism, each characterizes these links differently. Technological Determinism identifies social change as the *outcome* of inevitable technological developments. The Social Construction of Technology theory considers social norms to be at the *origin* of technological advancements. Within this broad framework, two opposing theories on the political function of technology evolved: the utopians versus the cyber-skeptics. The role of the Internet and particularly of social media, in promoting resistance during the Arab Spring has been studied in depth. Scholars on one side of the fence suggest that social media played a pivotal role in these revolutions mainly because collaborative platforms allow citizens to organize, share information and broadcast in a manner that was previously held only by mainstream media channels. This optimistic notion has been heavily criticized by those who suggest that technology backed political uprisings that were already on the move. This paper seeks to push

the ongoing debate between ‘digital evangelists’ and ‘techno-realists’¹ a step further by offering a middle-ground proposition, according to which technology’s role in collective actions is determined not only by the platform but also by the individual. In a nutshell, I argue that the Internet and social media are critical factors for social and political change, albeit insufficient ones. The argument is supported by a rich theoretical background on the dynamic between technology and social change, examined in light of three case studies – the revolutions in Egypt (2011), Tunisia (2010-11) and Turkey (2013).

The rest of the paper unfolds as follows. First, the selected case studies will be introduced, the “Twitter/Facebook revolutions” in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey are briefly described, and the impact of social media on the level of political engagement in each of these revolutions is discussed. Analysis is conducted according to the Khamis and Vaughn classification that suggests three potential functions/roles of social media in facilitating political activism – cyberactivism, civic engagement and citizen journalism. Backed with theoretical analysis according to which actual activism and cyberactivism greatly differ, the final section proposes a pessimistic point of view regarding the role of social media in each of these revolutions. The critique is also supported by empirical evidence extracted from past studies conducted on the use of social media during the three revolutions in question.

The Revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey

The Tunisian uprising from 2010-2011, in which the Tunisian military acted against the security forces, was successful in ousting President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after about twenty-two years of regime control. The protests followed the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 and expressed the people’s will for social, economic and political change. Similarly, in a series of demonstrations of civil, and at times violent resistances, the citizens of Egypt voiced their frustrations with corruption and the lack of political freedoms. The Egypt revolution of January 2011 resulted in longtime President Mubarak resigning in February of that year, following a thirty-year dictatorship. Though less significant in magnitude in terms of political implications, the Twitter revolution in Turkey also took place on the grounds of political despair. The Gezi demonstrations of 2013 started

1 Francesca Comunello and Giuseppe Anzera, “Will the Revolution be Tweeted? A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Social Media and the Arab Spring,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23 (2012): 453–470.

from discontent with the government's plan to build a shopping center at the heart of Taksim Square, and quickly turned into general protests against the right-wing government.

The successes of these specific revolutions, in terms of changing the political reality,² make them particularly interesting case studies. The success of the Egyptian revolution was attributed to several factors, *inter alia*, that protesters were organized in groups, used mixed information platforms, both traditional and new,³ and acted locally.⁴ In the case of Tunisia, it has been suggested that social and geographic indicators were some of the reasons for the revolution's success. Here, it should be noted that Tunisia is a geographically cohesive, small country with no major geographic barriers and is ethnically, religiously and linguistically unified.⁵ The Gezi protests are also considered a reminder of the public's ability to voice its opinions. Despite the fact that the governing party AKP is still in power, some commentators refer to changing dynamics of post-Gezi Turkey as binding "any government to be inclusive, responsive and transparent."⁶ The greatest common denominator of these three revolutions is the extensive use of social media during the protests⁷ and the ongoing debate regarding its contribution to their success.

The Debate

The Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) theory suggests that technology does not evolve in a vacuum, but rather that it is highly influenced by, and representative of, social norms. Within this broad framework, cyber-utopianism and cyber-skepticism are two schools of thought that

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- 2 Ranking levels of success is clearly a subjective index, yet these revolutions are widely considered successful in terms of changing the political reality, at least in part.
 - 3 Gilad Lotan, et. al, "The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *International Journal of Communications* 1375 (2011): 1405.
 - 4 Mohammed El-Nawawy and Khamis Sahar, "Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's 'Facebook Revolution' and Iran's 'Twitter Uprising,'" *CyberOrient* 6 (2012).
 - 5 L. Carl Brown, "The Tunisian Exception," October 14, 2014, www.juancole.com/2014/10/the-tunisian-exception.html (accessed December 2, 2015).
 - 6 Emre Kizilkaya, "Turkey's ultimate success and Gezi democratization," *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 15, 2015, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-ultimate-success-and-gezi-democratization.aspx?pageID=449&nID=83259&NewsCatID=550 (accessed December 13, 2014).
 - 7 Joseph Sarah, "Social Media, Human Rights and Political Change," *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review* 145 (2012): 157-163; Pablo Barberá, "SMaPP DATA REPORT A Breakout Role for Twitter?" In *The Role of Social Media in the Turkish Protests, Social Media and Political Participation Laboratory*, (New York: NYU Press(2013).

describe the dynamic between the Internet and social change in opposing manners. The digital-evangelists, or the optimists, tell the story of how online collaborative platforms promote democratization and activism given their unique characteristics. The techno-realists, meaning the pessimists, argue that civil movements predated the Internet and that social media encourages “slacktivism,”⁸ at best.

An Optimistic Analysis – Internet’s Role in Promoting Democratization

Clay Shirky, the founding father of the optimistic approach, theorized that social media promotes social activism as it allows individuals and groups to organize with minimum to no barriers.⁹ According to Shirky, social media paves the way to activism via access to information, and more importantly, access to conversation. This assertion is primarily based on the fact that the Internet is a many-to-many form of communication: as a decentralized, symmetric, ‘bottom-up’ mechanism, the Internet is structured to foster democracy by empowering the individual in her attempts to voice and collaborate. The general notion that Internet usage and political participation are linked has also been backed empirically in a study that found accidental exposure to news to be positively associated with political engagement.¹⁰ According to the optimist stream, the decentralized nature of the Internet is precisely what led to the “leaderless revolutions” and contributed to their success.¹¹ Internet ‘believers’ thus defined the Arab Spring as “Twitter/Facebook revolutions,” reflecting the idea that new media facilitated the uprisings of these social movements.¹²

It has been argued that this role of social media is amplified in authoritarian regimes given the atmosphere of oppression and citizens’ fear of voicing their opinions against the government unless others share

8 Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell> (accessed December 13, 2014).

9 Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011): 28.

10 Yonghwan Kim, Hsuan-Ting Chen, and Homero Gil de Zuniga, “Stumbling Upon News on the Internet: Effects of Incidental News Exposure and Relative Entertainment Use on Political Engagement,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 29 (2013): 2607-2614.

11 Sahar Khamis, “The Role of the Media in Arab Transitions: How ‘Cyberactivism’ is Revolutionizing the Political and Communication Landscapes,” In *The IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, eds. Senen Florensa and Andrew Bassols. (Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2013): 55-59.

12 Ibid.

their views.¹³ Furthermore, in most of these regimes, Internet censorship is a widespread practice; in both Egypt and Tunisia, the governments cut off Internet access following the outbreaks, *inter alia*, to disrupt social media communications.¹⁴

The political function of technology in the context of the Arab Spring uprisings has been heavily studied; the impact of social media throughout the Arab Spring demonstrations has been segmented and framed in different manners, using a variety of theoretical models.¹⁵ For the purpose of this paper, the conceptual model offered by Khamis and Vaughn is implemented. Khamis and Vaughn defined three potential functions for social media in contributing to mass uprisings. The revolutions in question will be analyzed according to these three categories – cyberactivism, civic engagement and citizen journalism.¹⁶

Cyberactivism

Cyberactivism has been defined by Howard as “the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline” with the goal of creating “intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes.”¹⁷ Another way of defining this category is by relating it to the digital use and influence of social media as in the case of *direct* political activism.

The dramatic role that social media played in the Egypt revolution is supported by a finding that suggests that those who relied on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, phones, and e-mail for information about the protests were more likely to attend the first day of the Tahrir Square demonstrations than those who had used traditional media.¹⁸ Furthermore, a 2011 study by the Dubai School of Government analyzed Facebook users at the time of the revolution

13 Zeynep Tufekci, and Wilson Christopher, “Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square,” *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012): 363-379.

14 Joseph, “Social Media, Human Rights and Political Change,” 157-163.

15 Pippa Norris, “The Impact of Social Media on the Arab Uprisings: The Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube Revolutions?” In *Advancing Comparative Political Communication Research: New Frameworks, Designs and Data, European Consortium Joint Workshops*, Antwerp, Belgium, April 2012; Comunello, “Will the Revolution be Tweeted,” 453–470.

16 Sahar Khamis and Kathrn Vaughn, “Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution: How Civic Engagement and Citizen Journalism Tilted the Balance,” *Arab Media & Society* 13 (2011).

17 Philip N. Howard, *The digital origins of dictatorship and democracy: Information technology and political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145.

18 Zeynep Tufekci and Wilson Christopher, “Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square,” *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012): 363-379.

in Egypt, and found that over 80% of Facebook users used the platform for political purposes; almost 30% used it to organize and manage activities. In Tunisia, almost 87% of users used Facebook for protest related agenda; about 22% were cyber-active in organizing the protests via social media.¹⁹ The use of social media during the Gezi protests was extremely widespread and was described as a significant tool in the hands of citizens for direct activism. The importance of Twitter during the demonstrations was, first and foremost, in facilitating social activism and political mobilizations by allowing civil society to coordinate and organize events.²⁰

Civic Engagement

Civic Engagement is described as “the process through which civil society is invited to participate in ongoing political, economic and social efforts that are meant to bring about change.”²¹ Civic Engagement thus can be described as the use of social media for *indirect* political activism.

During the demonstrations in Egypt, almost 31% of protesters used social media to raise awareness about the cause of the movement; 24% used it to spread information about the events. Furthermore, the role of social media during the Egypt uprising was found to be central, based on the fact that more than a quarter of the protesters had first heard of the protests through Facebook.²² In Tunisia, over 31% of protesters used social media to raise awareness about the political occurrences, and over 33% used it simply to spread information about the demonstrations.²³ The use of social media during the Gezi protests, in this case the use of Twitter in particular, was found to be highly significant given its large volume and capacity to keep the public informed and actively engaged. Overall, more than twenty two million tweets were published from June 1 to 11, around 90% of which came from within Turkey, and approximately 88% of them were in the Turkish language.²⁴

19 Fadi Salem and Racha Mourtada, “Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter, Arab Social Media Report 2011,” *Dubai School of Government - Governance and Innovation Program* (2011): 27-29.

20 Aslı Tuğç, Vehbi Görgülü, “Mapping Digital Media: Turkey,” *Open Society Foundations* (2012): 37-39.

21 Khamis, “Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution.”

22 Tufekci, “Social Media,” 363-379.

23 Salem, “Civil Movements,” 27-29.

24 Joseph, “Social Media, Human Rights and Political Change,” 157-163; Pablo, “SMaPP Data Report: A Breakout Role for Twitter?”

Citizen Journalism

Citizen Journalism is defined by Khamis and Vaughn as a citizen's use of digital tools to report on current events and give their own interpretation to reality. This concept addresses the phenomenon in which users of social media create a new form of media coverage that replaces, or complements, traditional media channels.

Tufekci and Wilson referred to the emergence of the "citizen journalist" with regard to the Egypt revolution. They found 48% of participants conveying critical information to the public via the production of photos or videos during the revolution.²⁵ The massive use of Twitter during Gezi protests was explained, in part, due to the lack of mainstream media coverage. Using social media as a journalistic platform enabled an open reporting of the events.²⁶ In all three revolutions, Twitter helped protesters mobilize and coordinate while drawing the attention of both the local government and the international community to the events.²⁷

A Pessimistic Analysis – Technology Does Not Lead to Revolutions

The aforementioned optimistic view has been criticized even by those that do believe in technology's ability to cure society's illnesses.²⁸ The pessimists argue that technology alone does not make revolutions, but that it is rather the will of the people that does.²⁹ One notion of criticism shared by most skeptics as to the Internet's ability to create social change derives from a realistic interpretation of actual, versus a potential, use of social media. As coined by Evgeny Morozov, a well-known critic, this distinction is referred to as 'cyber-activism' and 'cyber-hedonism.' In the context of political engagement, others call for the distinction between physical and cyberactivism, stating that the latter is insufficient as it is based on weak

25 Tufekci, "Social Media," 363-379.

26 Tunç, "Mapping Digital Media," 37-39.

27 Joseph, "Social Media, Human Rights and Political Change," 157-163; Olga Khazan, "These Charts Show How Crucial Twitter Is for the Turkey Protesters," *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2013, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/06/these-charts-show-how-crucial-twitter-is-for-the-turkey-protesters/276798 (accessed December 13, 2014).

28 Khamis, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution;" Micah L. Sifry, "Did Facebook Bring Down Mubarak?" *CNN*, February 11, 2011, www.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/02/11/sifry.egypt.technology/index.html?iref=allsearch (accessed December 12, 2015).

29 Chris Taylor, "Why Not Call it a Facebook Revolution?" *CNN Tech*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/TECH/social.media/02/24/facebook.revolution> (accessed December 12, 2015).

social ties and passive acceptance of ideas.³⁰ Referring to Morozov's idea of "slacktivism," Nelson called for the revival of "a notion of citizenship that involves more than one-click participation."³¹

An influential critique of the importance of social media to the Arab Spring was introduced by Malcolm Gladwell.³² Gladwell's argument is highly similar to that of Morozov's, yet his reasoning is somewhat different and has a more socio-technological angle. In a nutshell, Gladwell contends that the social ties needed in order to create political activism are strong ones, whereas the ties that exist on social media are weak, at most.³³ Gladwell also argues that the Internet's symmetric structure (considered by some as an advantage) is its Achilles heel:

Because networks don't have a centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority, they have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals. They can't think strategically; they are chronically prone to conflict and error. How do you make difficult choices about tactics or strategy or philosophical direction when everyone has an equal say?³⁴

Based on this theoretical framework, the impact of social media on political involvement in the three discussed revolutions should be called into question. Even in accepting the significant use of social media among protesters, one must bear in mind that the overall Internet penetration rate in most Arab societies is relatively low, making the overall cyberactivism effect inherently limited; the internet penetration rate in Egypt in 2011 during the time of the uprising was 21%.³⁵ Penetration rates of social media are even lower; Facebook penetration rates during the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia were 7.66% and 22.49%, respectively. Twitter penetration rates during the same time were 0.15% and 0.34% respectively.³⁶ This point of

30 Gladwell, "Small Change;" Khamis, "Cyberactivism in the Egyptian Revolution," 58.

31 Anne Nelson, "The Limits of the 'Twitter Revolution,'" *The Guardian*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/feb/24/digital-media-egypt> (accessed December 13, 2014).

32 Gladwell, "Small Change."

33 Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973): 1360-1380.

34 Gladwell, "Small Change."

35 El-Nawawy, "Political Activism 2.0."

36 Salem, "Civil Movements," 27-29.

criticism is less relevant to Turkey, in which the internet penetration rate at the time of protests was about 46%. Nonetheless, learning from the case of Iran, high penetration rate in and of itself is *not* a proxy for successful activism.³⁷ In other words, even in accepting the importance of social media to collective action and political engagement, there seems to be a ‘catch 22,’ a paradox stemming from the digital divide,³⁸ as citizens who are most in need of the media are those less likely to have access to it.³⁹

Furthermore, even those that do have access to the platform do not necessarily use it for political purposes. In Egypt, over 12% of Facebook users used the platform for entertainment purposes during the protests. The parallel ‘use for fun’ in Tunisia was 11%.⁴⁰ These quantitative figures illustrate Morozov’s notion of ‘cyber-hedonism.’ Lastly, among those that did use social media for political engagement, only a small fraction of cyber-activists dominated the digital sphere; a study of the Egypt revolution found 20,000 “elite” users generated about 50% of all tweets and only 30-40 million of the 200 Twitter users are actually ‘active.’⁴¹ Similarly, a study that analyzed Twitter’s data flow during the Gezi demonstrations found that 1% of protesters generated about 80% of all retweets.⁴²

Conclusion

In answering what the role of social media was during the Arab Spring uprisings, the conclusion is not as decisive as one would have hoped. Both cyber-utopians and cyber-skeptics make convincing theoretical arguments that are also supported empirically. Analyzing the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey, social media clearly fulfilled three political functions – cyberactivism, civic engagement and citizen journalism. Social media facilitated political involvement in those revolutions by providing a direct media channel for planning the protests, raising awareness of the events, and enabling individuals to spread news both in their communities and internationally. Despite this critical role, the importance of social media to the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey should not be overrated.

37 El-Nawawy, “Political Activism 2.0;” Gadi Wolfsfeld, et. al, “The Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Always Comes First,” *APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper* (2012).

38 Amir Hatem Ali, “The Power of Social Media in Developing Nations: New Tools for Closing the Global Digital Divide and Beyond,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 24 (2011): 185-219.

39 Wolfsfeld, “The Social Media.”

40 Salem, “Civil Movements,” 27-29.

41 *Ibid.*, 15.

42 Joseph, “Social Media,” 157-163; Pablo, “SMaPP Data Report.”

Optimists are faced with a reality that includes low Internet and social media penetration rates, considerable use of social media for non-political purposes, and lastly, a trend of centralized cyberactivism indicating that only a small group of users were, in fact, politically engaged. The overall conclusion is thus that the dynamics between technology and social change are more complex than has been previously argued. Social media is without a doubt a necessary driving force for political activism, yet it is insufficient in bringing about actual political change. **Y**