Sara Badoura, sbadoura@gmail.com sweetysara_91@ msn.com. Topic: Social Media.

The role of social media in the Arab Spring
Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate why the role of social media in the Arab Spring cannot be disregarded. In saying that its role cannot be disregarded, this paper does not argue that social media caused the Arab Spring but was an essential tool impacting the way in which the Arab Spring occurred. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part includes an introduction which briefly describes the beginning of the Arab Spring. Next, a working definition for Social Media is stated along with its characteristics and advantages. Part three shows how using social media as a tool had positive and negative impacts on the Arab Spring shaping different outcomes in different regions. Egypt and Tunisia fall under the regions where social media proved to be more efficient and who experienced more positive than negative impacts. The rest of the regions including Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain and Syria were shown to benefit less from social media whose functions backfired due to high government intervention.

Finally, this paper concludes that social media in all its forms has made a definite contribution in the Arab Spring but did not actually cause it.

Part 1 - Introduction

The Arab Spring is marked by a series of revolutionary anti-government protests and demonstrations beginning from Tunisia and spreading to parts of North Africa and the Middle East. It all began on December 17, 2010 when Mohammad Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor of fruits and vegetables, had his unlicensed vegetable cart confiscated by a police woman who slapped him, spat on his face and insulted his dead father when he was unable to fully pay his fine. After having no luck with the officials at the provincial municipality, he set himself on fire in front of it. Such an act is now deemed as the catalyst of not only the Tunisian Revolution, but the rest of the Arab Spring. Subsequently, Tunisia especially Sidi Bouzid the town of Mohammad Bouazizi became flooded with protestors. January 4th, the day which Mohammad Bouazizi allegedly died caused even more outrage than before and 10 days later on January 14th, Ben Ali's 23 year rule came to an end (Abouzaid, 2011).

The "victory" of the Tunisians led to the eruption of a wave of protests in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Morocco and Syria successively (UCDP, n.d). But this all begs the question, what has social media done to impact the Arabian Spring? How has social media helped in information transfer and more importantly, how has social media aided protesters in their campaign for democracy and social justice? The rest of the paper delves into details of social media and it's positive and negative impact on promoting the success of the revolutions.

Part 2: What exactly is social media?

Many scholars have touched on the issue of social media and plenty of definitions can be found thus for this reason, a working definition must be specified. This paper considers social media as being "built of content, communities and Web 2.0 technologies. Social media refers to applications that are either completely based on user generated content or in which user generated content and the actions of users play a substantial role in increasing the value of the application or service"(Kangas, Toivonen and Bäck, 2007). Social media includes "groupware, online communities, peer-to-peer and media sharing technologies, and networked gaming. Instant messaging, blogging, microblogging, forums, email, virtual worlds and social network sites are all genres of social media (Boyd, 2008). Characteristics of social media include its broad reach, high accessibility, rapid communications and interactions and constant updating at an economical price (The Social Media Guys, 2010). People are considered as consumers of the medium but participate greatly in the production level (Brussee and Heckmen, p.8).

Such characteristics can also be considered as advantages of using social media and it is very important to pay attention to the very large participatory role that the consumers themselves play. Consumers are able to share any information they wish and restrictions present on some forms of social media are freedoms on others. Consumers have the ability to choose which form of social media corresponds to their interests. The point I am trying to make here is that the idea of social media, it's characteristics and its advantages do not just suddenly change when applied on the North African and the Middle Eastern regions and can still apply on the people "consumers" in all regions during the Arab Spring. Except in cases of government intervention which is the main negative impact of social media on the Arab Spring, there really is no reason to say that social media along with its positive effects could not have been used or benefited from by the dissidents in the Arab Spring especially those of Tunisia and Egypt.

The reason why I am emphasizing on this point is that when it comes to social media and its role in the Arab Spring, 2 patterns of thought may be distinguished. The first one scoffs at the very thought of social media influencing the Arab Spring in any way whatsoever. The second one supports the idea of social media influencing the Arab Spring, but tends to exaggerate it. For this reason, I prefer to simply demonstrate why social media's role cannot be disregarded. That being said, it is neither the sole cause of the Arab Spring but an essential tool in shaping the Arab Spring wherein it had both positive and negative impacts and with this I hope to introduce a different pattern of thought.

Part 3: Social media's positive and negative impact on the Arabian Spring.

Starting with Tunisia, the internet is argued to have helped boost the revolts in 3 ways. Firstly, Tunisia has been long known for its oppression of mainstream media. It's continued persecution and censorship of any criticisms especially coming from bloggers and journalists must have left people with no choice but to revolt out in the open. Any publication or news site which entailed opposition or portrayed the government's acts of injustice are immediately blocked, not to mention the sites that are already spied on. During the Tunisian outrage, Facebook was also blocked and allowed from time to time and hacked as well with different display pictures of some users changed into pirate ships in mockery of the revolts. Dissident hackers immediately retaliated by harming Tunisian government websites. Secondly, at the time of the revolt, wikileaks spread around the Tunisian web about Ben Ali's son's outrageous expenditure and the Ben Ali family's luxurious life. Although these wikileaks were blocked, it had been too late as they had already been seen by many and this too bolstered the revolt and rage. Finally, since traditional media had been controlled by governments, Tunisians resorted to their cell phones, Facebook and Twitter. Videos of clashes in the street had been immediately uploaded on YouTube and there was a constant update of the number of causalities on Twitter. It left Tunisians with Arab and worldwide audiences sending messages of encouragement and support (Times' Technology Sunday supplement, 2011). In fact, this constant update portraying images of brutality by the government forces made the Tunisian government very unhappy with social networking sites which were strictly blocked and the effect of such an action was having more Tunisians out in protest demonstrations. This only increased pressure on Ben Ali who apologized and reopened the sites. Egypt also followed the same path. It is said that social media supported by internet was useful for propagation, gathering news, connection and coordination with dissident groups and individuals, taking photographs with mobile phones and satellite television for global reporting on the whole situation. Social media served as a better substitute for traditional media which wasn't helpful at all as it was strictly state controlled and censored. Therefore, Arab and International audiences were able to learn more about the events through Social Media than the traditional one. Facebook and Twitter's rapid interaction features helped groups meet and prepare on how to oppose government forces and what to do with teargas attacks. When the Egyptian government blocked the internet and telecommunication systems on January 27, 2011, many human rights organizations and world governments condemned the act which placed extra pressure on the Mubarak

government (New Internationalist,2012). It is important to note that the most positive influence of social media is seen in Egypt and Tunisia. Other regions have not had the same experience.

Dissidents of Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and others who followed the path of Egypt and Tunisia also had governments who undoubtedly followed their experience and took preventive measures in terms of social media and its power. For example, the Libyan government cut off the internet on February 18th,2011 which in turn hindered the dissidents' coordination and movement (UCDP, n.d). This shows just how helpful internet was to the dissidents. In fact, these governments' preventive measures against the free use of social media shows just how much of a threat social media was. Furthermore, the outcome in Egypt and Tunisia left those governments more aggressive and strict against any signs of revolt. Egypt and Tunisia seemed lucky enough to have begun with unprecedented protests leaving their governments shocked and pressured. The speed with which Tunisia and Egypt erupted with protests all coordinated in specific spots shows that social media undoubtedly played a role in the organizational process. Unfortunately for Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, the governments' preventive measures through the control of social media and internet along with spying activities left the officials more in control and less pressured by people. This in turn caused people to feel more restricted and less coordinated. Such regions have unfortunately experienced the negative impact of social media wherein at the end of the day, the government can easily intervene with it. Movements were easily prevented from happening or stopped immediately after. Egypt and Tunisia are an example of how important social media was as a tool for the actual occurrence of "civil unrest" as thousands who gathered in the streets had been informed about the protests through social media where the actual protests where planned. Even when the use of social media was hindered, it only motivated the dissidents more.

While social media helped Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Jordan and even Algeria similarly, I argue that the efficiency of social media as a tool in organizing protests was less and the negative impact of social media was more. I believe that for these regions, social media played a greater role in spreading information and publicizing protests of Egypt and Tunisia, consequently inspiring their people. Dissidents had obviously been monitoring the events of Tunisia and Egypt and felt inspired to do the same. In other words, social media played a greater role as a tool for inspiring these people. Some may argue that in this case, social media caused the revolts in the rest of the regions. Such a statement is problematic as it is equivalent to saying that had there been no social media, the Arab Spring would not have happened and that isn't

the case. Finally, I conclude this part with statistics that suggest an increase in participation of people in the Arab regions in Social media particularly social network sites during the periods of revolt.

The second edition of the Arab Social Media Report reveals that nearly 9 out of 10 Egyptians and Tunisians used Facebook to organize and publicize protests and all protests except for one took place. Furthermore, the report found that Facebook usage increased or doubled between January and April of 2011. The overall number of users had increased by 30 percent to 27.7 m compared to the 18% increase in 2010. Usage in Bahrain escalated by 15 percent only in the first 3 months, Egypt 29% and Tunisia 17 %. Libya's usage however, declined by 76% probably due to the extreme violence in the region. During the period of protests in Egypt and Tunisia, 88% of Egyptians and 94% of Tunisians said they had been getting their information from social media sites. On Twitter, the tweets peaked at certain events such as the January 14 protest in Tunisia and they increased days after the Bahraini demonstrations began on February 14. The Egyptian hash tag "Egypt" obtained 1.4 million mentions in three months (Arab Social Media Report, 2011). Such numbers only begin to show the sudden level of activity and participation in social media.

Conclusion:

This paper does not claim that social media, or the internet on its own causes people to revolt. It does not deny the fact that people themselves were already angered due to lack of democracy, freedom, justice, accountability and the presence of corruption. However, it argues that social media provided a suitable environment for such people to react to oppression and express their anger and dissent. Evidence shows that despite having different outcomes according to different regions, social media helped in mobilizing, planning and coordination. It proved to be more efficient in the case of Tunisia and Egypt who started earlier with unprecedented protests leaving their governments shocked and highly pressured. As for the rest of the regions, their governments had taken strict measures against protests and revolts to prevent an outcome similar to Tunisia and Egypt. Social Media by then was seen as a threat by those governments and this shows its power. Thus, these regions experienced greater negative impacts than positive ones and seem to owe part of their inspiration for revolt to social media's vast coverage on Egypt and Tunisia. Finally, from another perspective, social media may have influenced actions at an international level especially with the case of Libya who desperately took measures to keep all their actions unheard of but failed.

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