

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL UNREST

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**Abstract:**

*Our paper analyzes the relation between social media and political movements in contemporary world. Many authors consider that social media, especially social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are responsible for triggering the revolutions in the Arab world. Is the "Arab Spring" the result of modern technologies or its origins are more profound and mundane, deeply rooted in the society? Our response is that social media played an important, but only instrumental role.*

**Key words:** social media, political cyberactivism, revolutions, Arab Spring

**JEL classification:** D74

Recent social movements in the Arab world that culminated in the overthrow of the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have forced the political analysts and theorists to tackle a brand new problem: the relationship between social media and political activism in authoritarian regimes. Neither of those two realities is new in itself: revolutions took place from the beginning of the political organization of humans and social media, although owing a more recent history (Facebook, for example, exists since 2004 and Twitter from 2006), has become a commonplace of everyday society. However, the absolute novelty was the undeniable importance these networks had in organizing the protest movement that eventually led to the fall of oppressive regimes in the Arab world.

There is no doubt that social networks have revolutionized and continues to revolutionize the means of communication, information and interactions between people. Communication channels are now closer to the ordinary citizen than ever before in history. The internet has entered the age of Web 2.0., which means that information is not provided only by the media, governments and companies, but also by individuals through blogs, wikis, portals for viewing images and movies, file sharing sites, career management and social networks. The creator and the consumer of web content have come to identify with each other since the former consumer begins to actively contribute to the creation and dissemination of online content.

To what extent these communication instruments have come to put their mark on the world politics and to what extent they can contribute to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes and the establishment of democracy in these less favored countries? Has internet become the fatal end of the dictators who still make the law in different parts of the world? To this question two different answers have been given, one "optimistic" and the other "pessimistic", with different nuances in one direction or another.

The defenders of the first stance exalt the role of this interactive media and the new age of political cyberactivism it has opened. They are so excited about how this information product acted towards coalescing a strong opposition force that were quick to name the phenomenon "Facebook Revolution" or "Twitter Revolution", as appropriate. A typical example is the way the Time magazine presents the Egyptian revolutionary activist Wael Ghonim who played an important role in organizing street

protests through the page he created on Facebook. In the May 2<sup>nd</sup> issue Time Magazine<sup>1</sup> put Ghonim at the top of its annual list "100 most influential people in the world" considering him as the one who "helped the Egyptian people realize their power". In turn, Ghonim said that Egyptian revolution started online on Facebook and concludes: "I've always said that if you want to liberate a society just give them the Internet"<sup>2</sup>. The activist had even the intention to meet Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, and thank him on behalf of the Egyptian people for making possible the Egyptian revolution.

The second view gives these social networks the same role that any technical innovation had in the development of the social uprisings of any historical period that we take as a landmark. It is natural for people to use means of communication available at that time, those that prove most accessible and effective in achieving the purpose. But this does not mean that the technical means in question made possible the revolution or constituted their cause. After all, people make revolutions, not the technology. As The Financial Times's Gideon Rachman put it<sup>3</sup>, "the French managed to storm the Bastille without the help of Twitter - and the Bolsheviks took the Winter Palace without pausing to post photos of each other on Facebook". Both the invention of the guillotine in the case of the French Revolution and the emergence of the telegraph and the steam train in the case of the Bolshevik Revolution contributed to the success of these uprisings and rushed their ends, but without the will and the sacrifice of the people they would have remained simple technical means. By their very nature revolutions are confrontational, they involve street fighting, clashes between demonstrators and forces loyal to the government, blood and suffering. The authors who follow this direction have a much more moderate position when it comes to the role of social media in the political struggle for freedom.

In order to validate one or another of these positions we must first examine the concept of revolution and analyze its profound causes. In a very general weberian sense, revolutions have deep social, economical and political origins. Citizens' complaints about the living standards, about the ban or limitations of their fundamental rights and freedoms, the inability of political leaders to ensure progress of the country's born frustration that builds up, exceeds a threshold limit and explodes in street movements. If social revolutions aim at radical changes through which the existing property relations are abolished, by contrast purely political revolutions are those in which the government is replaced or the political regime changed, leaving unaltered the property relations and the distribution of goods in society. Modernization is another factor contributing to the burst of the irrational revolutionary forces. When the process of reforming the rules and customs of a society is left behind by the technological progress, the social life becomes less integrated and regulated and the individuals found themselves alienated from the institutionalized social and moral order (Durkheim). There is a need of a renewal of the state institutions which can not cope anymore with the economic challenges. Samuel Huntington believes that modernization is the main triggering factor of a revolution, being at the same time a cause and a consequence of it. The process of modernization creates a gap between the social mobilization within a society and the capacity of the existing institutions to absorb new demands. For this author, the revolution "is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of society,

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<sup>1</sup> Time Magazine (2011), May 2, The World's Most Influential People: The Time 100.

<sup>2</sup> Catharine Smith (2011), November 2, Egypt's Facebook Revolution: Wael Ghonim Thanks The Social Network, [online] available at: <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim\\_n\\_822078.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael-ghonim_n_822078.html)> [Accessed March, 5, 2012].

<sup>3</sup> Chris Taylor (2011), February 24, Why not call it a Facebook revolution?, [online] available at: [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-24/tech/facebook.revolution\\_1\\_facebook-wael-ghonim-social-media?\\_s=PM:TECH](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-24/tech/facebook.revolution_1_facebook-wael-ghonim-social-media?_s=PM:TECH) [Accessed March 7, 2012].

in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities and policies"<sup>4</sup>. The old ideologies cannot justify the existent social and political order anymore, the cleavages in society give rise to social tensions which unbalance the entire society and favors the emergence of new ideals and a new way of thinking the common future.

All these theoretical approaches have a high degree of generality which is closely correlated with their explanatory power. Their adequacy is confirmed by all those particular instances from the socio-historical reality in which they are met. The recent social movements are properly explained by such theories. Moreover, the social uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya confirm our view that social networks have contributed significantly in building revolutionary situations, functioning as dissemination and communication tools, but they have not determined them univocal. Thus, we tend to interpret magazine titles such as "Facebook Revolution" or "The First Twitter Revolution" rather as a recognition of a world premiere, the use of social networks for novel purposes different from those for which it was created. This is rather a recognition of surprise than an etiology and a diagnosis. As Calin Goinac warns us<sup>5</sup>, one must distinguish between the preconditions of a revolution, its catalysts (or its precipitants) and its detonators. The Facebook page created by Wael Ghonim to boost the anti-government movements and organize the January 25<sup>th</sup> protests should be considered rather a detonator or at most a precipitator of the Egyptian revolution. As Wendell Philips said, "Revolutions are not made, they come. A revolution is as natural a growth as an oak. It comes out of the past. Its foundations are laid back"<sup>6</sup>.

In Algeria, for example, activism through social networks did not have the effects of its neighboring countries. Algeria is a country that shares its eastern border with Tunisia and Libya where authoritarian leaders were driven from power by social movements and its western border with Morocco where the King Mohammed VI promised significant legal and constitutional reforms, the most important being the election of the prime minister from the party which holds the majority in parliament. Despite major economic and political discontent among the population such as unemployment, inflation, corruption, food price, living conditions, restrictions on freedom of expression, here the calls for public protests on September 17, 2011 had almost no echo. These examples have not mobilized the Algerians although they suffered two decades of violent confrontations. In Algeria social media was employed both by revolutionary activists and government supporters. The call on social media for protests on September 17, 2011 was greeted with suspicion and the confusion that surrounded this event has caused some analysts to consider it a government manipulation.

Then there are those countries where clashes between revolutionary forces and the government took a dramatic turn and where the unequal bloody struggle in the streets was mirrored in the virtual world in a cyberwar for information supremacy. As international media revealed, Syrian Facebook users encountered a primitive certificate-forging scam carried out by the government.

In North Korea access to computers is restricted to families loyal to the government and the information is strictly censored. Ramesh Srinivasan, a UCLA professor, thinks that in this country we won't see a liberation movement fueled by social media as happened in Tunisia or Egypt. "It's extremely interesting because North Korea and Cuba, to a lesser extent, are great examples of how the presence of the Internet may not mean the end of gated walls. It debunks the mistaken assumption that

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Huntington (1970), *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, p. 264

<sup>5</sup> Călin Goinac, (2001), *Revoluții și schimbare socială*, Lecture Notes, [online] available at: <http://goinac.bol.ucla.edu/Revolutiununu.htm> [Accessed March, 14, 2011]

<sup>6</sup> ibidem

the Internet's presence alone will flatten and democratize," Srinivasan said. "Instead, this is all dependent on whether regimes can independently fight or subvert social media for their own aims"<sup>7</sup>. Also, in Yemen the Internet penetration rate is very low.

What conclusions can we draw from this? Firstly, we must recognize the contribution of social networks in starting and organizing social uprisings. Sites as Facebook or Twitter function as a catalyst for revolutionary movements in those countries where electronic information is not subject to harsh censorship. This requires an educated public, with a relatively good financial situation, fed up with government corruption and abuses of an authoritarian regime. Immediate communication is a major plus of these social networks. The solidarization and organisation of protesters is thus facilitated, but this is not enough to trigger a revolution. The social tensions must have been already accumulated and those willing to go out and fight for the common ideal must have reached a critical mass. The awareness of each protester over the fact that the entire group has reached such a critical mass lights up the revolutionary enthusiasm allowing to be envisaged a possible success for an operation otherwise very risky.

The viral nature of information is also an important feature, but this can work both ways, making possible the viral proliferation of government manipulations. There is no authority, no test for the truth of the information posted, no means for its validation beyond any doubt. Dictator's intelligence services can equally well use these social networks to deceive, to sow despair, to doubt, to divide, to demoralize and induce fear. The large number of interconnected users can be both an advantage and a disadvantage for the revolutionary cause.

In his article "Twitter, Facebook and YouTube's role in Arab Spring (Middle East uprisings)", Thomas Sander remarks<sup>8</sup> that social media is important because it helps to mobilize protesters rapidly, to undermine a regime's legitimacy and to increase national and international exposure to a regime's atrocities. After him, social media has a greater chance of success in pseudo-democratic regimes like the one of Ben Ali in Tunisia. An autocratic leader will brutally suppress any call to disobedience. On the other hand, in authoritarian regimes the communication networks and infrastructure are entirely in state hands, they are not run by private operators and thus are subject to strict control and censorship. But where social media is related to the local economy and daily interactions, it will be much harder for the regime to dismantle them without dramatic economic and social loss. Social media is today an useful part of an activist's toolkit, but revolution is the decision of many people. As such, is very hard to determine whether a revolution would or would not have occurred in the absence of social media because it's impossible to conduct experiments with things like people, countries and history.

Perhaps one of the well articulated conclusions that could be drawn from here was formulated by Clay Shirky: "The more promising way to think about social media is as long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere. In contrast to the instrumental view of Internet freedom, this can be called the environmental view. According to this conception, positive changes in the life of a country, including pro-democratic regime change, follow, rather than precede, the development of a strong

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<sup>7</sup> Emi Kolawole, (2011), December 19, Kim Jong Il dies: Is there hope for social media in North Korea?, [online], available at: <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/post/kim-jong-il-dies-is-there-hope-for-social-media-in-north-korea/2011/12/19/gIQAGyIz4O\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/post/kim-jong-il-dies-is-there-hope-for-social-media-in-north-korea/2011/12/19/gIQAGyIz4O_blog.html)>, [Accessed March, 8, 2012]

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Sander, (2011), March 2, 2012, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube's role in Arab Spring (Middle East uprisings), [online], available at: <<http://socialcapital.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/twitter-facebook-and-youtubes-role-in-tunisia-uprising/>>, >, [Accessed March, 8, 2012]

public sphere”<sup>9</sup>. In other words, social media cannot be a substitute for a civil society with a strong self-awareness.

We live in a global world, a world where flows of goods, services, finance and people will shape both the relationships between humans and those between people and political institutions. Information follows the same global path and despite dictators’ efforts, it will be increasingly harder to control. In this context, social media represents a laboratory of civil society.

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