

What role did social media play media essay

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The Arab Spring of 2010 was a domino style revolution that spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa resulting in a complete upheaval of the autocratic status quo in the region. Though the Arab Spring was unique for many different reasons, there was one factor that caught the eye of nearly all political scientists i. e. the role that social media played in the revolution, so much so, that the uprisings were deemed the 'Twitter' or 'Facebook' revolutions. This essay will aim to discuss that role and analyze the extent to which social media was instrumental in triggering and sustaining the revolutions. It will look at three forms of social media that were widely used in the Arab Spring: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as according to a protester in Egypt they used " Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate and YouTube to tell the world" (Kassim, 2012), and the focus will be on three countries, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The Arab Spring sparked off on the 17th of December 2010 in Tunisia when an educated young man set himself on fire in front of the Governor's house after having suffered humiliation and mistreatment at the hands of a government functionary. This proved to be a trigger. The news of the death of Mohamed Bouzid spread throughout the country on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter as the government tried to keep it out of the traditional media. " Tunisia was fertile ground for an internet-enabled uprising. Despite a well educated population (with a median age of 24), the country had not created enough jobs for the vast number of young people obtaining secondary and college degrees, particularly in the interior and western parts of the country" (Delany, 2011). Social media acted as a platform for Tunisians to come together and share their grievances about their leadership. Slowly through these platforms, people realized that they

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had a common emotion and goal, the hatred of Ben Ali, the dictator who had ruled Tunisia for twenty three years and his ouster. Social media was used to unite everyone towards this common goal. It allowed for a cheap, fast and practical way to mobilize large groups. It wasn't only informing people of what was happening in their country; rather it was encouraging people to take part in active protest." In their shared sympathy for the dying man, networks of family and friends came to realize that they shared common grievances too. The realization hit home as people watched YouTube videos about the abusive state, read foreign news coverage of political corruption online, and shared jokes about their aging dictator over SMS. Communicating in ways that the state could not control, people also used digital media to arrive at strategies for action and a collective goal: the deposition of a despot" (Howard, Hussain, 2011). Besides internal mobilization, social media was used to connect with the outside world and let everyone know what was going on in Tunisia. This resulted in large organizations and many foreign governments taking notice and putting international pressure on the regime. For example, when the regime started hacking into Tunisians Facebook accounts and e-mails the US State Department took notice of it. A CNN report stated that: The U. S. State Department -- in an unusual public criticism of a pro-West Arab government -- said last week it was concerned about " recent reports that Tunisian ISP providers, at the direction of the government, hacked into the accounts of Tunisian users of American companies including Facebook, and providers of email such as Yahoo and Google, and stealing passwords. This kind of interference", it continued, " threatens the ability of civil society to realize the benefits of new technologies" (Lister, 12 Jan 2011). Social media sped up the process to such

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a large extent that the regime was caught completely off guard and their attempts to block social media websites only led to the tech savvy Tunisians finding other ways to communicate. According to Safranek:" Although Tunisia's government practiced some of the most repressive Internet censorship, the country has one of the most connected populations in the region outside the Gulf; 33% of the population is online, 16% on Facebook and 18% using Twitter. Although the Ben Ali regime blocked YouTube during the month of unrest, it did not entirely block Internet access, and seasoned cyber activists played bridging roles, re-posting videos and Facebook content about protests from closed loops of private networks to Twitter and online news portals with greater reach" (Safranek, 2012). It seemed that a crucial role Social Media played was that it allowed everyone to have a voice and therefore there was no actual leadership. This flustered the regime more because this was a new, non-traditional kind of resistance and the regime was not adequately prepared to either counter or control it. Eventually the pressure increased to the extent that the ruler Ben Ali had to flee the country, and this process was remarkably not spread over years but just over one month. Soon after Ben Ali's government was toppled in Tunisia, civil unrest started gaining momentum in neighboring Egypt. The political dynamics of Egypt were similar to that of Tunisia, it had a highly educated 'youth bulge' and widespread unemployment. Secondly, Egypt was ruled by Hosni Mubarak, an autocratic dictator who had been in power for over 30 years and ran the country as a police state. Egypt too, was considered to be one of the more internet friendly countries in the region with 5% of the population being Facebook users. (Safranek, 2012). What triggered the revolt was a group on Facebook commemorating Khaled Said, a man beaten

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to death by the police. The group was a representation of the corruption of the police and the lawlessness within the country and it attracted half a million followers. Mubarak, learning from the mistakes of his Tunisian counterpart, Ben Ali, moved to shut down the internet and telephone services in the country so that the unrest could be subdued. This proved to be fatal for the governments because: " Ironically, government efforts to crack down on social media may have incited more public activism, especially in Egypt. People who were isolated by efforts to shut down the Internet, mostly middle-class Egyptians, may have gone to the streets when they could no longer follow the unrest through social media" (O'Donnell, 2011). Also, because the internet and cellular services in Egypt were privatized to a large extent, Mubarak did not have the power to cut off all forms of communication within the country. This resulted in a fast and determined spreading of the message and mobilization on the streets, catching the government by surprise." They found solidarity through digital media, and then used their mobile phones to call their social networks into the streets. Protests scaled up quickly, leaving regime officials and outside observers alike surprised that such a large network of relatively liberal, peaceful, middle-class citizens would mobilize against Mubarak with such speed" (Howard, Hussain, 2011)On 25th January despite all of Mubarak's efforts, thousands gathered at Cairo's Tahrir Square and after 18 days of protest, on the 11th of February, Mubarak resigned from power. Political theorists have come to the conclusion that the reason digital social media was used so successfully in Egypt and Tunisia was because " both countries have relatively young, tech savvy populations" (Freelan, Duffy et. al, 2011). They argue that approximately 70 percent of internet users in these

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countries are below the age of 34, and therefore the young protesters in the streets made full use of social media to their advantage. Secondly, there is a claim that social media was used so effectively because in " both countries the government has censored the media, giving individuals a strong incentive to turn to the Internet for credible sources of information" (ibid). There is also another argument regarding the role of the social media in the Arab Spring. An article by the University of Washington makes the claim that social media helped spread democratic norms across international borders (Freelan, Duffy et. al, 2011). Social media gave people within autocratic states the opportunity to interact with people from all over the world. It allowed them to communicate with friends and family in democratic countries. This interaction created awareness within them and empowered them to ask for their fundamental rights. Secondly, social media allowed people from the neighboring Arab states to share their information and knowledge with each other about the revolution. Thus from the arguments so far, it appears that analyst agree that Social media did indeed play a significant role in the Arab Spring. It helped in allowing the citizens of these repressed states to unite and have a forum to discuss their grievances. Social media websites helped people to organize themselves, communicate with each other in real time and put together a united opposition to the regimes in their respective countries. Black reiterates this by stating that " these platforms for the first time allowed protestors to plan, organize and execute their protests, to create and sustain a feeling of unity that was vital in maintaining them, and in essence provided a " virtual space" for what was unlawful assembly to the authorities" (Black, 2012). Moreover it must be noted that in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, the traditional forms of media

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were heavily influenced by the state and in an attempt to subdue the protests, were not accurately reporting what was going on in these countries. This in fact reinforced the role of the social media to provide an alternative narrative. The Libyan author Hisham Matar explains this when he says " In Tunisia and Egypt, I think Facebook and Twitter have created a political discourse that is bypassing the old regime. Political dictatorships take possession not just of money and belongings but of narrative. The internet has created a new language" (Singh, 2011). It is also argued that the role of the social media was extremely crucial in catching the eye of the outside world and putting international pressure on the regimes. This was an extremely important function that social media played for it not only allowed protesters to report what was going on in the country in real time, but also because protesters were in constant communication with the outside world, the regimes had to be very wary about using any violence against the protesters. Hisham Matar, argues that it would have been much harder to get rid of the regimes if there wasn't any international pressure. He is quoted as saying " In Libya, in the early ' 90s, there was an uprising in the Green Mountain region in the east. Almost the same thing happened is as is happening now. People went onto the streets; Gaddafi sent in helicopters and bombed them. " And nobody knew about it. Nobody reported on it" (Singh, 2011). However a different perspective exists as well. While it is acknowledged that social media played an important role in the Arab Spring, many political theorists are of the opinion that the role of social media has been highly exaggerated and that despite common belief, social media should not be considered as the cause of the Arab Spring" According to Norris," social media may function to sustain and facilitate collective action,

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but this is only one channel of communications amongst many, and processes of political communications cannot be regarded as a fundamental driver of unrest compared with many other structural factors, such as corruption, hardship, and repression" (Norris, 2012). On similar lines, Hisham Matar is quoted in an article as saying " that the role of the internet was " an exaggeration". His argument is that only the elite in North African and the Middle East had access to the internet and knew how to use it effectively: the working classes, he insists, didn't - but they were the ones that powered the revolution. His conclusion is that it may be fashionable to talk about Facebook and Twitter, but that " other very important elements of human life" played a role, by which he means the courage of individuals" (Black, 2012). In their article, Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer claim that " One cannot understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate" (Wolfsfeld, Segev, Sheafer, 2013). They make the argument that citizens who are not well off and live in more autocratic regimes are more likely to feel the need to mobilize against their own governments but would find it difficult to use social media. On the other hand, citizens of wealthier countries with more democratic structures are going to have uncensored use of the internet and all social media websites, but at the same time they are going to be less likely to want to mobilize against their governments. This leads one to the hypothesis that various factors need to be considered when analyzing this issue. These factors include different political environments, the literacy levels and internet penetration in a society, socio-economic conditions and the democratic freedoms a population enjoys. An example of this is the revolution in Libya which followed the revolutions in Tunisia and <https://assignbuster.com/what-role-did-social-media-play-media-essay/>

Egypt. Although it seems as if there was no difference between how things played out in the three countries as the people of all three countries rose up and successfully removed their respective dictatorial regimes from power. However, it is very important to note that while social media played a strong role in Tunisia and Egypt, in Libya on the other hand, it played a very minor role. Gaddafi's regime, besides having the advantage of having seen the impact in these two countries, also had a much tighter grip over the state's internet infrastructure and immediately shut down all social media websites in the country. The power of this dimension of the revolt was thus successfully curtailed. Moreover the socio-economic conditions and political environment was different from Egypt and Tunisia. It may be also be postulated that while the revolts in those countries were predominantly indigenous, in Libya, external factors too were involved. According to Maya Bhardwaj:" The conflict in Libya transformed into what was internationally recognized as civil war due to the presence of jointly necessary and sufficient variables. Harsh crackdowns, lack of civil society, and alienation of protestors by the Gaddafi regime exacerbated the grievances felt by rebel forces and smoothed over ethnic, religious, and tribal tensions. Militarization of coalition rebel forces and localization of the struggle to defined territories created the opportunity for defined rebel and loyalist troops. Finally, international intervention and training, regional rejection of Gaddafi's regime, favorable media coverage, and recognition of the National Transitional Council as legitimate jointly pushed the conflict in Libya into civil war" (Bhardwaj 2012). The role of social media can therefore be said to be limited in Libya. Gaddafi's eventual ousting from power was not caused by people uniting under the Facebook or Twitter umbrella; rather he was removed by armed

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militias that were backed by NATO. In conclusion, it may be said that social media played the role of a catalyst in the Arab Spring, but it would be prudent to view this as one dimension in a multi-faceted and complex combination of factors, that created the fertile environment in which revolutions were sparked off and developed into decisive movements which changed the course of history in those countries.