

Social media as a catalyst for change essay sample

[Media](#), [Social Media](#)



Technology. Society would be at a loss without it. Trains and planes would stop running, streetlights would go out, and cities would shut down. In fact, the entire world would come to a grinding halt. The lives of everyday people are intrinsically and irrevocably intertwined with technology, and for good reason. Technology has allowed humankind to progress. Through a sort of coevolution, humans and technology have helped each other to advance and become what they are today. As a society, humankind has developed from using sharpened sticks as weapons of war to AK-47s, and from printing presses as ways to spread news to Facebook and Twitter. Despite these huge advancements, humans have not yet progressed as far as they can. It is human nature to constantly push the limits of what is possible, so progress is inevitable, but limits could not be pushed as far as fast if technology did not reveal what human senses and determination are incapable of discovering. The idea of technology, though, is broad and multifaceted, and social media is just one area. Just like other forms of technology, social media has developed throughout history, growing increasingly faster and wide reaching. From inventions such as the six-hundred-year-old printing press to the Facebook and Twitter of today, media-based technology has never wavered in its role of expediting communication and opening doors. Social media is the catalyst that society needs in order to move forward. History is riddled with almost constant rebellion and change. Humans are simply not content with standing still, but they alone are incapable of achieving change at the rate and the scale at which is desired. This shortcoming forces them to turn to tools, specifically those stemming from media-based technology. However, technology itself does not cause change.

Something that is not a living and breathing entity, that is not human, cannot act by itself in creating progress. Technology merely provides a path of least resistance through which change, pushed forward by men and women, can travel. Says Fernand Braudel in *Capitalism and Material Life*, “ Technology is only an instrument and man does not always know how to use it” (Braudel 274). But when people do know how to use it, great things can happen. This has been true throughout history. Take, for instance, the printing press.

Invented in the 15th century, it revolutionized the production of texts and ushered in an age of drastic transformations. This begs the question of what if. What if the printing press had not been invented? One of the first things that comes to mind is a world without public access to the written word, and that would not be incorrect, but very few people would imagine a society where the Catholic Church had a near chokehold on the lives of ordinary people, where science was completely stifled in favor of the worship of an all-powerful God, and where illiteracy was the status quo. With the invention of the printing press came an era of great change that swept across Europe.

There was the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. All of these movements changed not just Europe, but the world in myriad different ways. The lower classes were able to see the foolishness of ideas such as the “ Divine Right” to rule and the ability to buy one’s place in heaven (Oberman). Knowledge is most definitely power, and this information gave them a chance to rise. And yet, this great change would not have been possible without the printing press. The printing press spread ideas and words throughout Europe, giving people more access to

the truth and, in essence, destroying the ignorance that the Catholic Church had used as a weapon until that point. Unable to control what was known and who knew it crippled the Catholic Church, and their hold on the world gradually diminished. To be fair, a world controlled by a Catholic theocracy is very unlikely, but this event still reflects how technology acts as a catalyst for social progress. After this era of widespread change in Europe, time continued its steady march onwards. Science and technology advanced, and the world entered a time of cars, computers, cell phones, and the Internet and all of its web-based communication glory. With the advent of inventions like Facebook, texting, and instant messaging, the world is connected in a way that makes a globe containing seven billion people seem small. People have access to information they never would have known before, and they are able to spread it faster than ever. The significance of this is far-reaching.

Throughout history, media and technology was a tool for those in power. Few people were literate, and those few literate people holding the reins were able to successfully control what was news and what was quietly swept under the rug. Controlling the media was simple because there were only a few ways for news to spread. Things have changed, though. Today, more and more outlets for the distribution of media are being created, making it harder and harder to control the information to which populations had access. With so many holes to plug, some information always gets through, meaning that media has now become the bane of leaders' existences by becoming the tool of the people (Fareed 2). Take, for instance, the revolutions in the Middle East. It all began in December of 2010 with a

Tunisian man burning himself to death in protest of his treatment at the hands of the police. This single act sparked a series of revolutions throughout the Middle East, now known as the Arab Spring (Blight). But how did this happen? The Middle East is no stranger to revolutions. Only a century ago, a social and political revolution began merely to end with nothing having changed. So what makes this time different? The answer is simple: social media. During the Arab Spring, the reality of what was coming to pass spread like wildfire. People realized that the anger they were feeling was not unique, and that they could unite with others that felt the same way.

Others discovered that the government they once obeyed was actually corrupted and needed changing, while others got a chance to see what was really happening in their country for the first time in their lives. When people were able to whip out iPhones and record police brutality or post about the latest movements, things could not be kept quiet. To date, leaders of four Middle Eastern nations have been forced from power and fourteen other nations have experienced major protests and civil uprisings (Friedman 1).

Life is changing in the Middle East. New governments that have the potential to endure are being built, while others are being remodeled to fit the needs of today. Never has this happened before. Now, that is not to say that these revolutions would not have occurred without technology, but it is clear that it would not have happened nearly as quickly or on as grand of a scale had people not had access to social media. However, for every light side, there is a dark side. Unfortunately, people still adhere to the belief that if something is written out, be it in a newspaper or on the Internet, the information must

be true. This blind trust is dangerous. Says Helen Gao of The Atlantic, “[Technology’s] break-neck speed allows little time for fact-checking or editorial supervision, which also means it can move too quickly for censors” (1). There is no screening system for what can be posted or who can post on the Internet, and there is definitely no screening system for who can see what is posted.

This universal access provides a new platform for radicals and zealots to spread their ideas, as well as creating a new medium for the rampant distribution of rumors and ignorance. Lies can be spread just as easily as truth. In the summer of 2011, Fox News posted a tweet on Twitter stating that Barack Obama had been assassinated. What followed was a panic. Over 33, 000 individuals saw the tweet before Fox had the chance to take it down. The fact that it came from a well-established news source convinced people of its validity, and thousands of people were left believing that their president had been murdered. Strangely enough, Obama is not alone in this. Justin Bieber, Johnny Depp, Will Smith, and Bill Cosby are just a few celebrities who have been the victims of being “murdered” by Twitter (Dunham). Even now the search “Justin Bieber is dead” turns up thousands of results on Google, displaying the panic that millions of people experienced upon the creation of the rumor.

Though this is nowhere near the grand scale of the Arab Spring, it does act as a microcosm for what could, and probably does happen, with information regarding relevant current events. This is why, despite all the good it does, technology is dangerous. It can aid in exploitation and cruelty, in defamation

and slandering, and in fear mongering and scare tactics. With its help, a society could be destroyed, but with it a society could also be rebuilt. Europe and the Middle East would look very different today had there not been media-based technology helping along the Protestant Reformation and the Arab Spring. To regulate the reach of the Internet and other forms of social media would mean hobbling what is such an effective catalyst for change, but to let it grow without boundaries would enable its abusers. There is no good way to deal with this situation. Now that social media has found a place in the world, society can never go back to a time before it was invented. Society is stuck despite its constant progress because reverting is not an option. Once something is created, it cannot be uncreated, no matter the consequences that arise, and that is the price that society must pay in the name of progress.

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