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Facebook and Twitter: New Hope of Revolution?

By Aaron Ng

Synopsis

Recent events in the Middle East suggest social media's structural importance in bringing about revolution in authoritarian regimes. The role of social media in the recent uprising in the Middle East may, however, be overstated.

Commentary

THE DISGRUNTLED discussed their grievances over the Internet. People watched state repression on YouTube. Activists used Facebook and Twitter to organise protests. Authoritarian regimes were overthrown as a result. Welcome to the world of new social media. Many observers said that the successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have underlined the power that social media possesses; its ability to collaborate, coordinate and mobilise the masses to overthrow authoritarian governments. Social media is championed as the new hope in accelerating revolution and democracy in despotic countries.

But people revolt due to underlying grievances and dissatisfaction with the social, economic and political conditions of their countries, not due to a Facebook update or a Tweet. Nobody is seriously suggesting that social media alone toppled authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. However, in the aftermath of the successful revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, the role of social media, which is being celebrated as an accelerator of revolution, is being overstated. It is one thing to say that social media is a tool that can facilitate revolution; it is quite another to say social media is the factor in bringing about revolution. Revolution occurred when the general population was ready for change, wanted change, and usually an event would trigger the revolutionary process. Social media is just a tool for the people who wanted change and not the catalyst of change.

Not a new phenomenon

The nexus between social communication and revolution is *not a new phenomenon* in history. Pamphlets were used during the American Revolution in the 18th century, tape recorders in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and fax machines during the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. People throughout history used all means available to them to mobilise. New means of communication that emerged due to technological innovation served basically the same function of their predecessors. Should anybody be surprised that no one talks about the importance of pamphlets in today's revolution? Social media is basically a tool of today's technology acting as a facilitator of revolution. Thus, could the recent uprisings in the Middle East have taken place without the existence of social media?

Word of mouth

Information surfacing out of the recent uprisings in the Middle East shows that it is not clear social media was even the *main tool* in organising the protest. Recent accounts from the protesters in Tunisia and Egypt revealed that many of them got to know of the protests through word of mouth in the streets than they did from the Internet prior to the protests. This is unsurprising, as only 20% and 34% of the population in Egypt and Tunisia respectively have access to the Internet. Furthermore, evidence would be required to prove that there was no 'offline' network or organisation of activists in providing any sort of coordination prior to the protests; for this would then firmly suggest that people march to the streets due to social media.

A thorough analysis is needed on the revolution in the Middle East and one that would require much more investigative work than to readily attribute it to the social-altering phenomenon of the social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Certainly, more data would be needed to understand the social media's role in mobilisation of the recent Middle East uprising, how powerful and significant this influence will require investigation and analysis for years to come.

A double-edged sword

Even if one accepts the view that social media indeed has mobilisation power, it does not necessarily make revolution more likely or effective. Social media is not a *one-directional tool* but a double-edged sword. If the argument that social media could make revolution more likely and effective, it could also make it less likely. For instance, social media was celebrated as the most important factor in Iran's Green Revolution, during which protesters gathered in the streets following the disputed presidential election in 2009. However, since the revolt collapsed, the Iranian security service began a fierce crackdown on the protesters. The same technology that was said to have prompted the people into the streets, assisted the Iranian security services in following the trails left by the protesters in their 'tweets,' resulting in thousands of arrests, jail terms, and imposition of death penalties.

Lastly, we should not generalise the effect of the mobilisation power of the social media. It would be an unreasonable assumption that development of social media in other despotic countries would generate the same results such as the successful revolutions in the Middle East. There will always be new technology invented and there will always be another revolution in the world.

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