Social Media and Democratic Revolution; The Impact of New Forms of Communication Democracy

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Abstract

Communication has been critical for the success of revolutions throughout history. My intent in this thesis is to support the contention that new media technology has become a vital communication tool for today’s democratic revolutions. I begin my research by studying communications tools and their roles in revolutions throughout history. I then conduct three case studies, examining two nations that played a crucial role in the so-called “Arab Spring” democratic revolutions of 2011, Tunisia where the rebellions began and Egypt, one of the central countries in the Middle East/North Africa. I also examine the role social media is playing in the efforts of some segments of China’s society to gain democratic liberties. These case studies show that the accessibility and rapid transfer of information facilitated by new social media have made it easier to express opinions and spread ideas, thus enhancing the citizen’s capacity to affect governmental policies. While not a tool to ensure long-term democratic change, social media has become a platform to organize and connect groups in successful revolutions, and thus has made democratic revolutions more likely to be successful. This leads me to the conclusion that new social media is indeed a vital tool for fostering and implementing today’s democratic revolutions.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Historically, from the French revolution to the current Arab revolutions, communication has been a channel of democratic change. In the modern era, the wide use of social media has made communication more efficient and rapid, and has created a widespread exposure of larger numbers of people to information, which was not possible in the past. The use of social media has made today's revolutions more likely to be successful, I argue, because the progressive sharing of information has made it increasingly difficult to silence people and to control the growth and organization of groups, and for leaders to ignore the masses and keep their populations completely controlled. Leaders now must fear consequences from a global audience and international norms and law.

But despite the growing influence of international law, there are still far too many repressive governments in the world. In 2008, 103 countries failed to observe standards of liberal democracy.¹ Social revolutions have since taken place in many such countries and in this thesis, I

argue that these revolutions are unlikely to be successfully waged unless participants are able to communicate their concerns effectively to supporters, both within and outside the nation or group. Three examples of nations that have experienced social agitation for democratic change will be discussed and compared: Egypt, Tunisia, and China. I have selected these countries for several reasons: Tunisia is where the so-called Arab spring began and despite its setbacks still shows the most promise in creating a stable democratic government; Egypt was chosen because of its historical importance in the Arab world as well as its ongoing struggle to find democratic stability; and China is a global power where a democratic government may develop in the future.

In short, I am trying to find out if today’s new social media are a necessary tool for democratic revolutions to succeed, using the case studies I have listed.

Social media is defined as “forms of electronic communication (such as web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).”² Because of social media citizens have developed a greater capacity to affect governmental policies.³


communication before social media became widespread tended to be one-way, for example
government to group, group to government, or person-to-person. With the new social media all
sectors can simultaneously communicate at once in a short span of time. Thus, for example, a
man set himself on fire in Tunisia, and within minutes this act of sacrifice against the leadership
of his nation was circulating via YouTube, inciting protests and followers in his name.\textsuperscript{4} This act
would not have been as powerful or as quickly circulated if it were not for the use of new social
media. This new technology allows people in one country to see how people in other nations live
and have inspired many to seek the same type of treatment and rights from their government.
This is one of the reasons the Arab spring spread so quickly in North Africa and the Middle East;
information was quickly dispersed to others via fast networks of communication with
instructions about how to make changes happen.

The use of social media has increased the accountability of governments to their people.
Whereas before the advent of new social media many human rights abuses may not have been
known, social media technology has become a tool for spreading awareness. Governments
cannot easily get away with abusing their people when it is likely that stories, photos, and videos
will be presented to a larger audience. There is a new breed of "citizen journalists" with cell

\textsuperscript{4} NPR Staff. "The Arab Spring: A Year Of Revolution." NPR. December 17, 2011.
phone cameras who self-publish to websites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WordPress. The use of social media has brought a high level of accountability, and transparency, which can be a tool for democracy, fostering communication between citizens and leaders. Social media accountability has been visible in nations in North Africa and around the world.

In this thesis I am focusing on how these media are used specifically to promote democracy. Robert Dahl believed that two dimensions, “public contestations” and “participation” define democracy. He defined democracy as “a democratic process that must make effective participation and voting equality available to all adults who are subject to the binding collective decisions of society. A democracy must also provide citizens with opportunities for understanding civic issues, as well as allow them to have control over the matters that reach the decision making agenda.” Social media is a genuine tool for spreading democracy. It has facilitated international cooperation. This conforms to liberal theory which not only focuses on individual freedoms but proposes that democratic nations are more peaceful than authoritarian ones. Social media has the potential to promote peace, although it is clear that it also can be


6 Ibid.

used for purposes such as terrorism and organized crime.

As already mentioned, in this thesis I will focus on two areas of the world: Asia (specifically China) and North Africa. In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long controlled the media with the goal of preventing large-scale social unrest, avoiding public leadership splits, and keeping the military loyal to the CCP. Chinese leaders are torn in deciding how to control social media; they recognize that while social media can open a forum for discussion and organization of uprisings, it can also alert the CCP to problems and help leaders solve issues or suppress groups before movements gain momentum. Additionally, social media is proving to be more and more beneficial for promoting economic development. As for North Africa, the region continues to struggle following democratic revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. While these nations’ futures are uncertain, effective communication fostered by social media has made these democratic revolutions not only possible, but in the long term more likely to assist in creating sustainable democratic change.

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Chapter 2: Research Design

To repeat what I said in Chapter 1, in this thesis my argument is that the spread of new social media is necessary for revolutionary success. Historically revolutions have been unlikely to be successfully waged unless participants are able to communicate their concerns effectively to supporters, both within and outside the nation or group. Today because of the revolution in technology, the way to communicate effectively is, I maintain, through the use of new social media. Social media is particularly suited to the spread of democracy and regime change.

In this chapter I will define some terms and theories relating to my hypothesis, and in the following chapters I will examine the case studies of Tunisia, Egypt, and China by analyzing the role social media has played and could play in those states in the future. The international relations theory I will focus on for the purpose of this research is liberalism. I will also discuss some theories of revolution and communication.

Theoretical Literature

A democracy with basic democratic liberties is defined by Robert Dahl as “a democratic
process that must make effective participation and voting equality available to all adults who are
subject to the binding collective decisions of society. A democracy must also provide citizens
with opportunities for understanding civic issues, as well as allow them to have control over the
matters that reach the decision making agenda. “9 This means that the interests of all citizens
should be taken into account in a true democracy. Almond and Verba define democracy in a
similar fashion: "a democratic political system is one in which the ordinary citizen participates in
political decisions; a democratic political culture should consist of a set of beliefs, attitudes,
norms, perceptions and the like, that support participation."10

Many countries today call themselves democratic, however they do not give their citizens
the democratic rights listed. Social media can assist in promoting these rights. Social media’s
continuous feed of information makes it difficult for the government to control, and makes it a
tool that can be used to bring about democratic liberties in countries that do not currently
prescribe them. Social media is also a tool that promotes greater global integration.

Liberalism is defined as the “focus on the demands of individuals and social groups, and


10 Gabriel Abraham Almond and Verba Sidney. The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in
their relative power in society, as fundamental forces driving state policy and, ultimately, world order. For liberals, every state is embedded in an interdependent domestic and transnational society that decisively shapes the basic purposes or interests that underlie its policies.”

Through social media, society’s interests are now being heard to a greater degree.

One of the main theories advocated by the liberal school is the democratic peace. The democratic peace is defined as “the belief that democracies have indeed made a separate peace. What is more, much research suggests that they are also unusually likely to sign and honor international agreements and to become economically interdependent.”

This idea rests on the assumption that democratic nations have more to lose economically by going to war, and more to gain by cooperative actions between nations rather than war. The reason the democratic peace is important is because it can lead to eventual global cooperation. In the ideal, it is said that if nations become democratic they will no longer be interested in conflict, because it will be in their interests to cooperate through institutions for the benefit of all. Again, this is relevant to the promotion of democracy through new media.

Jurgen Habermas studied a communal forum for political discussions called the “public


sphere.” The public sphere is a space where people can gather and debate issues that impact that group or population. Habermas defines the public sphere, by first defining what is meant by public, “when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs- as when we speak of public places or public house.”¹³ The public sphere is later defined as “a domain between state and society, a medium of criticism and, potentially, regulation.”¹⁴ According to Habermas the most definitive feature of the public sphere is accessibility to everyone, because when a society allows the general public the freedom to discuss its problems, then it can begin to critically reason.¹⁵

Habermas saw the ideal type of public sphere as the mid-eighteenth century British model (meaning it gradually evolved out of society and allowed the public to have a platform to speak about government issues), because the public sphere was universally accessible without heavy press censorship, thus allowing for critical reasoning.¹⁶ While the public sphere was


¹⁵ Ibid.

created in France and did have similarities to the British model, it differed in its emergence.

According to Habermas, the public sphere in pre-revolutionary France was a result of the easing of censorship and government control. The easing of control gave all French citizens the opportunity to discuss politics. The new public sphere created an environment that fostered the creation of Jacobin Clubs, which were underground clubs that supported the creation of a French Republic. Critical reasoning as a result of the public sphere assisted in sparking the revolution. Habermas sees the press as the public sphere during the French revolution, and the city’s coffee houses as places to discuss and critically reason based on information gained from the press or public sphere. The public sphere in France appeared suddenly, unlike the long transition in England. The result of France’s quick transition to a public sphere was turbulent times that ultimately led to democracy. This pattern is similar to the Arab Spring; social media assisted in the speed of the communication amongst opposition groups and ultimately the revolution, but the long-term democratic results of the Arab Spring are unknown.

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Marshall McLuhan believed that “the medium is the message,” meaning the way we receive information changes society’s views. He explained,

This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. Thus, with automation, for example, the new patterns of human association tend to eliminate jobs, it is true. That is the negative result. Positively, automation creates roles for people, which is to say depth of involvement in their work and human association that our preceding mechanical technology had destroyed. Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves.  

Social media has exemplified this theory. New technology produces new roles and relations. Social media as medium has created a source of information that is instant and easily accessible. This has changed how societies receive information and organize meetings between individuals and organizations. Therefore, social media has profoundly impacted how revolutions are now being organized.

Young people have integrated social media more and more into their daily routine, making it a logical tool for political organization and debate. For example, hashtags are a simple way of posting a thread to # sign. This new process of searching for others discussing an idea or

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topic expedites the organization of people around a thought. Tamara A. Small researched the significance of the hashtag and found many examples of it expediting political discussion.

According to Loader and Dan Mercea,

#cdnpoli is the most prominent Canadian political hashtag which Small found to be a site of diverse interaction among elected representatives, journalists, individual bloggers and interest groups. Particularly notable were indications that the information flow generated through the #cdnpoli hashtag was at the forefront of a fast paced transformation of political news making. Thus, in spite of not advancing the democratic virtues of political deliberation, this political hashtag served the function of aggregating, distilling and directing political information.

Last but not least, Small contends that contributions to the hashtag’s flow of information may be regarded as another invigorating form of participation in democratic politics. 21

The way people communicate has evolved since the French revolution. Social media technology is necessary to keep pace with modern day communication and for the effective organization of a revolution. Social media has now become engrained in the modern day revolutions, and authoritarian governments are much more able to stop a revolution if citizens are not using it. Additionally, social media is spreading international norms by connecting peoples’ experiences and international rules and norms.

Globalization is the term used to refer to today’s technologically integrated world. The worlds’ problems have become increasingly more global and borderless. Issues such as pollution,

disease, and terrorism are not bound by the nation state. This interdependent world order has reduced state sovereignty and empowered non-state actors. As Higgot and Underhill note, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an increasingly important role at the international level, partly thanks to new technologies such as the Internet. Some larger and more active NGOs are now also referred to as global social movements (GSMs).”

Many non-state actors have played a beneficial role in promoting human rights and providing aid. The internet has been a source of information and organization for them, as it has for individuals and groups, but not all non-state actors play a positive role. Non-state actors do not have legal obligations, and so terrorist groups and drug cartels fall into the category of non-state actors as well. The internet has also become a source of cyber terrorism by non-state actors.

On the bright side, the exposure of crimes against humanity and the environment by non-state actors, using new social media has provided evidence of international laws being broken and enhanced the importance of international law. With this in mind, theorists should see social media technology as a tool for expediting positive and democratic change and eventually


fostering peace among groups and nations. In the next chapter, I will provide some background on the historical use of technology in revolutions.
Chapter 3: Historical Background: How Revolutions Make Use of Technology

Communication tools have been a necessary part of social movements and revolutions throughout history. A revolution is defined by Rosemary O’Kane as “the overthrow of one government by the people and its replacement by another government.” According to the James Davies in the American Sociological Review,

a revolutionary state of mind requires the continued, even habitual but dynamic expectation of greater opportunity to satisfy basic needs, which may range from merely physical (food, clothing, shelter, health, and safety from bodily harm) to social (the affectional ties of family and friends) to the need for equal dignity and justice. But the necessary additional ingredient is a persistent, unrelenting threat to the satisfaction of these needs: not a threat which actually returns people to a state of sheer survival but which places them in the mental state where they believe they will not be able to satisfy one or more basic needs.

Additionally, an attitude has to prevail that things are so bad that citizens have nothing to lose by turning against their government. The army, police, and officials need to question the government’s legitimacy as well. The officials need to feel that the citizen’s cause is more valuable than their jobs, or any demonstrations could turn into violent repression as happened in


Tiananmen Square in 1989 when students and others were gunned down after demonstrating against the Chinese government.\textsuperscript{26}

Revolutions require not only the right mental state, but a catalyst for a spark. The spark in many revolutions has been violent death. For example, in Indonesia for example in 1989, “Protests against Suharto's "re-election" in Indonesia in March 1998, culminated in the shooting of four students in May, which set off a round of bigger demonstrations and more violence until more than 1,000 were dead. Thirty years earlier Suharto could kill hundreds of thousands with impunity. But corruption and the Asian economic crisis had imploded support for his regime. After 32 years in power, his family and their cronies were too rich, while too many former backers were getting poorer - a poverty they shared with ordinary people.\textsuperscript{27}

In the Arab Spring it was the suicide of a young vendor. It should also be mentioned, in addition to a sociological mood, and a spark, revolutions require the right players. The youth have been critical in many revolutions. Revolutions need young and healthy people who have the energy to withstand the non-stop nature of a revolution. It is more than health, it is the fervor of youth that has made young people vital to revolutions. Students have been critical sources of communication, energy, and organization. As Mark Almond stated in 2011: “As Egypt reminds, revolutions are made by the young.” \textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

Organization and information bring together people that have been moved to revolt by the conditions mentioned. The French revolution was not only a revolution, but a revolution that was sudden and with high levels of communication that had not been witnessed before.\(^\text{29}\) During the French revolution communication was transmitted through print media. Print had previously catered to the elite by publishing comprehensive long books only the highly educated could read, but suddenly the industry changed, and began selling smaller books with topics for the general public. The print circulated amongst the French population in the form of newspapers, cartoons, posters, and small pamphlets. The circulation of written material during the French Revolution was the largest since the Protestant reformation. This tremendous media circulation in France followed an ease on censorship, allowing more citizens to participate in political discussion.

Communication evolved during the French revolution when the common citizen was brought into debates over national and social issues.\(^\text{30}\) Ordinary French citizens gathered in coffee houses to exchange ideas and to organize. The easing of oppression and the introduction of new communication tools, combined with places to gather and speak such as coffeehouses to


empower common citizens. 31

The media tactics employed during the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro and his supporters contributed to the downfall of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldivar’s government in 1959 and the rise of Castro’s government. The rebels were able to overthrow the government by clearly communicating their message and image to supporters, through workers unions, university student groups, small clandestine organizations, the radio, propaganda art, and strong leaders supporting the underground network. 32 Workers Unions and students were an organized and powerful source of communications for the communist revolution. In the 1930s the communist party in Cuba grew to be one of the largest in Latin America with a significant base of Cuban workers. The National Confederation of Cuban Workers (CNOC) threw its support behind the communist movement. CNOC was a powerful network and was able to organize hundreds of labor strikes. 33 The Federation of University Students (FEU) played an important role in spreading the message and information to young people. They were led by Jose Antonio Echeverria, who would speak on anti-imperialism, and critique the batistazo (supporters of the

31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.
Cuban President) to crowds of students, many of whom became supporters of the movement.\textsuperscript{34}

The leaders of the revolution took on almost a mythical persona, based on posters and heroic stories of the Castro brothers and Ernesto “Che” Guevara de la Serna.\textsuperscript{35} The posters were an effective means of communication reaching a large audience in Cuba because of the island’s small size. They were hung in union halls, community centers, schools, and private residences.\textsuperscript{36} The leaders were portrayed as fighting for the common worker and for a solution to years of oppression. These images gave the organization a symbol of a new government worth joining and fighting for.

Fidel Castro recruited and organized clandestine groups for the movement, 160 rebels were captured, tortured, and murdered by the Batista government. However, these government actions did not stop the rebels, instead it drove them to keep fighting. In jail Castro and his fellow supporters continued to organize and plan.\textsuperscript{37} After Fidel Castro’s release from jail and departure for Mexico local worker unions (such as sugar workers) continued to organize and

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.


protest the current government despite Batista’s 1952 outlawing of the Communist party.38

During the 1950s in Cuba the primary source of information on the revolution was radio. The rebels spread information about their underground movement through a station called Radio Rebelde. The station often broadcast the latest crimes of the Batista government, first hand stories of battles against the Batista army, statements by the rebel leaders, and other general information for activists involved in the movement.39 Fidel Castro recalled the importance of the station to the movement: “Radio Rebelde truly became our means of mass communication, to talk to the people, and it became a much listened to station. It was crucial for disseminating military information and played a key role throughout the war.”40

In Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, known as the Zapatistas were the first group to use the internet as a platform for activism and social change. The Zapatistas were formed by a group of indigenous people from the Mexican state of Chiapas in reaction to the government taking their lands and natural resources as well as to their forced migration, and economic policies that devastated their livelihoods and way of life (The North American Free

38 Ibid.


40 Ibid.
Trade Agreement negotiated around that time was seen as harming the area’s corn market). The organization became official after NAFTA went into effect (January 1, 1994), with the organization declaring war on the Mexican government and demanding full autonomy. The campaign began with physical force when in January 1994, 124 Zapatistas and 50 government officials clashed and died, but when the fighting stopped, the Zapatistas continued the movement online. Focusing more on civil society than arms proved to be more productive for the campaign as it gained support through the internet. The movement’s online presence started with a simple website designed by a graduate student at Swarthmore College, but within a short span of time the Zapatista movement grew into many easily accessible websites sharing large amounts of information.


42 Ibid.

43 Elena Maria Martinez-Torres,. "Civil Society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas." Peace Review 13, no. 3 (2001): 347-55.


movement created email lists, webgroups, and a personal blog written by the leader,
Subcommander Marcos, on their websites to raise funds and draw attention. The EZLN
(Zapatista Army of National Liberation) utilized imagery for their promotional materials. They
effectively branded the campaign in order to generate recognition and a following. People came
to associate the movement with the leader’s image wearing military garb, a black balaclava and
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Hundreds of Zapatista authors posted online, and organized virtual “sit-ins,” but
the movement was not strictly limited to interactive online content. The Zapatistas combined
virtual and traditional “in person” strategies such as demonstrations, conventions, and national
and international gatherings, but the events were organized online to gain a greater attendance
and press.\footnote{Elena Maria Martinez-Torres. "Civil Society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas." Peace Review 13, no. 3
(2001): 347-55.}
The Zapatistas’ internet campaign led journalists to come to the region to cover the
movement’s progress. Interviews with comandantes grew to the hundreds.\footnote{Ibid.}
They were then covered on a variety of media sources including newspapers, magazines, radio, and tv.
Additionally, human rights activists and celebrity endorsements drew attention to the campaign.

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The government found that silencing the group had become nearly impossible when they had the support of NGOs and international media attention.

In an ironic twist, the globalization (that is in part due to technology) the Zapatistas movement fought against is also what brought their movement to the forefront. The Zapatistas opened a new forum for social movements by utilizing the internet as a platform to voice their concerns. The result of their efforts online gained them widespread international recognition by NGOs, the press, and the international community. The campaign’s main purpose from its founding to today has been to empower the indigenous Chiapas. Although the campaign has not resulted in the Zapatista’s full autonomy and a change in the Mexican constitution, they have gained rights and credibility from the national government, support from many leading NGOs, and the establishment of government sponsored programs to aid poverty (such as the “Opportunidades” and “Puebla-Panama Plan”). 49

As had happened with changes in print, the new media created a new forum for the general public to find information, and even a virtual place to gather. New social media, unlike traditional forms of media, is fast and is less risky than physically speaking in opposition. The safety of a blog or twitter post makes it easier for anyone to voice openness against his or her

government instead of hiding in fear.

When speaking to the United States General Assembly in 1988 as the Soviet Union was collapsing, the former leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev said that he believed that advances in communications technology left no society closed. The world today has become inter-connected. The internet has become an important source for business and communication worldwide. For countries to grow and prosper they must work with other nations. Communication via the internet has become vital for business, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and citizens. This interdependent and connected world is often referenced as a product of globalization. Globalization “refers both to the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.”

The pressure of globalization and need for new media technology have opened countries to each other. From the 1990s the internet grew from millions to billions, and today one in four people worldwide use social media. Many governments have praised the new forms of


communication as a right guaranteed through freedom of speech; for example, the UK has utilized Facebook to increase citizen participation and to improve social services.  

However, some non-democratic governments fear the new public sphere of social media, and these nations have tried to control the internet and/or fill it with government propaganda. For example, Turkey has proposed in 2014 internet censorship laws, which are an official way of preventing uprisings similar to the Arab Spring. Officials in Turkey have reasons to worry about social media and the security of the government. Turkey has experienced opposition protests against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and these protests have been heavily supported via social media. The research company eMarketer notes that Turkey has the highest Twitter penetration in the world. Turkey’s proposed new internet laws would put their internet regulations on an equal footing with countries that already practice heavy censorship such as Iran and China. The proposed bill grants Turkey’s telecommunications authority (TIB), the authority  


54 Ibid.  


56 Ibid.
to “block any website without first seeking a court ruling. It also allows TIB arbitrarily to efface ‘offensive’ content without users being any the wiser. And it obliges internet-service providers to store all data on web users’ activities for two years and to give their profiles to the authorities on demand.”57 Regulated social media may not prove to be helpful to Turkey’s government. In many cases taking away previously granted rights tends to anger citizens.

Iran’s new president Hassan Rouhani promised the opening of social media on taking office, and his foreign minister engages in debates via twitter and Facebook on the government’s behalf. However, the policy of officially opening social sites to the general public has not lasted longer than a day as of November 2014: the government opened social media to everyone for a day long test.58 The Iranian news media has supported the government’s censorship by pointing to the effects on citizens’ privacy, and has noted that the government is protecting the public from social corruption.59 However, the fear of social corruption has not been strong enough to keep people away from social media.

Today’s new media technology, while regulated in many nations, has been difficult for


59 Ibid.
governments to fully censor. Iran has long been regulating the internet; however the number of users has continued to grow. In 2000 less than 1 million used the internet, but this number grew to 23 million by 2008 with 60,000 blogs written in Persian. These numbers continue to expand despite government control. Governments with heavy censorship of new media make it difficult for citizens to find reliable information online, but people keep finding new ways to bypass the government, even if it is only a temporary solution. Social media sites may be shut down in one nation, but that does not stop a video or image caught on a smartphone from being shared via social media from a neighboring country. Additionally, new smart phone apps for sharing, and the speed at which things can be placed on the internet through multiple social outlets make it very difficult to completely monitor all material that has been placed on the web by citizens.

New media is becoming more accessible daily around the world, creating the new public sphere. Today’s new public sphere has the ability to create a demand for more democratic liberties. Public spheres foster an environment that allows for critical reasoning which has historically been necessary for democratic revolutions. Research on revolutions and


61 Ibid.
breakthroughs in communication have shown a positive correlation between the two.  

Authoritarian governements are fearful of new media technology for this reason, and continue to try to control information.

As I have said before, the world is becoming increasingly interconnected. The shared problems of the world such as pollution, terrorism, disease, and cyber warfare are forcing nations to not remain closed, but to join the world stage. New social media has given disenfranchised populations a platform to reach governments that otherwise would not listen. In a globalized world with an ever-expanding global public sphere, social media has now become a necessary tool for democratic revolutions.

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Chapter 4: Case Study of The Tunisian Revolution

The Arab Spring in both Tunisia and Egypt shared many similarities. Authoritarian rulers kept citizens compliant in a manner used by most nations, by providing social goods. The social goods provided by the state included: free education, nationalized health care, and household subsidies for food, electricity, and water. Governments also created public sector jobs for the influx of university graduates. Providing social goods in exchange for obedience is often referred to as a ruling bargain. A ruling bargain is defined as “a metaphor used by political scientists to refer to the accommodation reached between states and the citizens they govern.” 63

Ruling bargains had been very effective in insuring compliance in North Africa and the Middle East. However, when Arab socialism began to decline, authoritarian nations started to feel pressured to end many of the social benefits that had been part of their ruling bargains. One reason why this was the case was the spread of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is defined as “a market-driven approach to economics in which the role of the state is kept to a minimum.” 64 Additionally, a large proportion of the populations of the Arab


64 Ibid.
world in the 1990s and 2003 was in the youth bracket; 60 percent of the Arab population was under the age of 30, constituting a “youth bulge.” Before the revolution began in 2010 youth unemployment in Tunisia was at 30 percent and this number does not include the youth that had given up looking for a job or could only find part time employment.\textsuperscript{65} The large percentage of restless and unemployed young people was a main contributor to the strength of the social media movement within the Arab Spring.\textsuperscript{66}

Before the revolutions in 2002, The Arab Human Development Report noted that “There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory governance... This freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development.”\textsuperscript{67}

This lack of participation became more important to people when they felt their social benefits being taken away with little opportunity to improve their status nor any platform by which they could make leaders listen. The lack of democratic rights then became a priority for those who felt they did not have anything to lose, which is a critical part of revolution formation.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
The decline of Arab socialism, rise of globalization, and the emergence of a tech savvy youth bulge, combined to set the stage for the Arab Spring. The revolution in Tunisia began with a fruit vendor named Mohammad Bouazizi. Bouazizi was like many young Tunisians, educated with few job opportunities. He had a family of eight. However, he was able to make a livable wage selling his fruit. His dream was to buy a pick up truck for work, to better provide for his family. However, on December 17, 2010 Bouazizi was humiliated by a policewoman, who confiscated his unlicensed fruit cart, and in public, slapped him, and was said to have spat on him, and insulted his dead father. After officials refused to see him to submit a complaint about the policewoman, he drenched himself in lighter fluid and set himself on fire in public. His story resonated with Tunisians who understood his shame and frustration over the lack of employment, poor living standards, police violence, and a lack of human rights.68

Protests continued to escalate within a short period of time, resulting in the shooting of five protestors by police in Thala, Tunisia, and several additional sacrifices similar to Bouazizi’s.69 One protest included a 22 year old who electrocuted himself to death in the middle

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.
of the protest over unemployment. The protests continued to grow with citizens circumventing the government regulations placed on the internet, and utilizing cell phone text messaging to directly send images to the international media that had already become interested because of their social media outreach.

Part of the movement’s strength came from powerful organized groups (such as the labor unions) that synced with the movement through the use of new media. The actions of the Tunisian Federation of Labour Unions known by the antonym (UGTT) gained momentum in Gafsa, and at the same time a group of 300 protestors gathered near the government’s palace in Tunis. This solidarity and overwhelming organization of protestors around the country quickly made an impact on the government. Efforts were made by the government to stop the uprisings. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali visited Bouazizi before he died, offered new jobs (although only enough to help about one third of university graduates), new elections, an end to internet censorship, and presidential limits that would end his term. However, 10 days after the death of Bouazizi, Tunisian protestors used new media to organize demonstrations in capital of Tunis, the chief of staff of the Tunisian army told the protestors to stand down, and the authoritarian


71 Ibid.
government was overthrown.\textsuperscript{72} This was the first time in the modern era that anyone had witnessed a popular uprising ousting a ruler in the Arab world, and the first time anyone had seen a revolution largely organized through the use of new social media.\textsuperscript{73}

How New Media was Used During the Tunisian Revolution

Lina Ben Mhenni was an influential blogger who launched a blog entitled “A Tunisian Girl.” She was motivated not only by the problems she saw around her in Tunisia, but also by the fact that her father had been a political prisoner under Mr. Ben Ali’s predecessor Habib Bourguiba. The blog covered topics such as censorship, women’s rights, human rights, and freedom of speech. The Tunisian government tried to stop her through intimidation and threatening letters, and by breaking into her home and taking her computer and cameras. The government blocked her site because of its threatening content, but she was able to use other proxy sites to keep access to her pages and found new ways to utilize technology when hers was confiscated by the government. After Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, she helped spread

\begin{itemize}

\end{itemize}
the news by posting images and news on her blog, Facebook, and twitter account. 74

Figure 4.1 Mohamed Bouazizi’s suicide

SUNDA, JANUARY 22, 2011

MOHAMED BOUAZIZI & CORRUPTION IN TUNISIA

During the Dec. 25th demonstrations that took place in Tunis following Bouazizi’s death, she

continued to upload “real time” photographs and information covering the protests to social media sites. Her blogging and social media updates continued throughout the revolution; she took photos of protestors killed and wounded by police for her social media outlets in various cities such as Sidi Souzid, Regueb, and Kasserine. 75 According to Ryan Yasmine known as “Astrubal,” author of the blog Nawaat (the most reliable source of information during the government crackdown of media outlets during the 2011 revolution).76 His blog started in 2004, becoming one of the first Tunisian pro-democracy blogs. The site was blocked throughout the revolution, but continued to run through proxy sites. During the revolution the blog posted information and photos from protestors in the streets. The blog received the 2011 Netizen Prize from Reporters Without Borders and the Index on Censorship Media Award.77 The blog continues to report today on Tunisia’s new democracy. 78


77 Ibid.

By rapidly exchanging news, messages, photos, videos, and information in Tunisia, social media helped Tunisians were able to decipher the truth.\textsuperscript{79} There were several key moments of the revolution displayed via the virtual sphere. One video on YouTube showed the Tunisian Presidential airplane on the runway (with the date and times specified) during one of President Ben Ali’s wife’s many high priced and luxurious shopping excursions, earning her the reputation of Tunisia’s Marie Antoinette, and stirring national outrage.\textsuperscript{80} Meanwhile, the Bouazizi tape created what sociologists call “cognitive liberation”:

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.\textsuperscript{81}

Lothan’s chart breaks down the sources of social media content during the Tunisian Arab Spring. Lothan shows that Tunisian citizens heavily influenced new media information.


\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
Figure 4.2 (Actor Types in Tunisian Arab Spring)

- Other (individuals) 24.7%
- Blogger 17.8%
- Journalist 14.5%
- Activist 11.9%
- BOT (automated programs for organizational interests) 8.4%
- MSM (mainstream media) 7.1%
- Non Media Org 4.1%
- Web News Org 3.7%
- Researcher 2.5%
- Celeb 1.9%
- Digerati (online communities) 1.8%
- Political Actor 1.6%

Source: Lothan (2011)
Was the Revolution Successful?

Before the revolution, Tunisia’s repressive government was supported by the United States and France. When social unrest occurred it barely made headlines. The social discontent that had been festering for years found organization and a source of communication in new media. New media created a forum for discussing discontent, and workable strategies for change and goals. The use of social networking and mobile phone’s new media elevated the Tunisian voice to a worldwide audience and required the international community to respond with pressure following the internationally agreed norms of protecting human rights.82

In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution, the role of new media and its importance have been debated. The Arab Spring revolutions, which drew strength and organization via the virtual sphere, were defined by “spontaneity, leaderlessness, diversity, and loose organization, which were both their greatest strength and “their greatest liability.” 83 New media played an essential role in organizing people and spreading ideas since people were not allowed to effectively organize in person for anti-regime activities. As Gelvin notes, new media’s leaderlessness made


it difficult to arrest one particular person for organizing the events, and its speed generated worldwide exposure leaving the government overwhelmed and unable to compete.\textsuperscript{84}

Social media allowed citizens the opportunity to address political corruption in way that prior to advancement in technology and communications would not have been possible. It is worth noting that leading up to the Tunisian revolution “between 2008 and 2010, Facebook memberships increased in the broader Middle East 360 percent to 3.5 million.”\textsuperscript{85} Diamond and Platt state that new media differs from prior forms of communication by creating live maps of simultaneously unfolding events. The maps in Tunisia and Egypt (see next chapter) were incredibly effective in giving a visual representation and a guide to the movement. These real time maps allowed the government to see the strength and speed of the movement, which led to the government trying to take steps to placate the outrage. The maps gave citizens involved in the movement encouragement and a way to visualize the real progress of democratic change.\textsuperscript{86}

\textbf{Tunisia Today}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.

Since the revolution, Tunisia has been going through what many leaders call a “transitional period.” This transitional period has been marked by gains and losses in democratic liberties as well as government stability. New media technology has the ability to spark outrage, organize participants, and transform the government at a rapid speed, but the needs of a revolution differ from the needs of state building.

The quickness of Tunisia’s revolution has both contributed to democratic change and to the country’s 2014 lag in democratic stability. Since the revolution Tunisia has experienced additional demonstrations over unemployment, the economy, and attacks on religion. 87 The government has not allowed complete freedom of speech. A Tunisian cartoonist posted cartoons insulting Muhammad on Facebook and is now in his second year of a 7-year prison sentence. 88 The rapid revolution from an authoritarian government to a democracy left the country trying to catch up, in regards to how to structure the government, and lasting infrastructure did not have time to develop. Regardless of its flaws, without the speed and fluid communication permitted by new media, the revolution would have lost a great deal of its strength.

An article in The Economist, published in 2011, spoke of a new Tunisia rewriting the


88 Ibid.
past, and noted that despite setbacks Tunisia’s democracy remains. Politicians have chosen to listen and compromise, but despite government efforts, solutions to the country’s problems have not occurred with the same speed as the revolution. The instant gratification (caused by an almost overnight regime change) instilled an attitude that the new government would be able to fix citizens’ issues overnight as well, and that was not the case for the new Tunisian government trying to get its bearings.  

Following the 2011 Tunisian revolution the Ennahda party was elected to power. The Ennahada party resembles the Muslim Brotherhood in the belief in a more Islamic nation. Many Tunisians complained about the militia type groups associated with the Ennahada party, blaming the party for the deaths of public figures, artists, and participants in sit ins around the region. The assassination of opposition leaders Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2011 were a source of particular anger against the Ennahada party.  

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90 Ibid.


92 Ibid.
complained that the government had been taken over by militant Islamists, and they began to protest around the country, advocating for reform. They utilized new media as well as traditional forms of protest that had been successful in the revolution to voice their concerns.

In 2013 the Tamaroud Tunisia group proposed a way out of the national turbulence and dissatisfaction with the new government. Tamaroud is a political group that started after the assassination in 2011 of Mohamed Brahmi who was an opposition leader. Tamaroud proposed five points:

We demand, first of all, that the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), and all the bodies emanating from it including the current government, are immediately dissolved. We also call for the dismissal of Prime Minister Ali Larayedh. Secondly, we believe the position of the interim President Moncef Marzouki has become untenable. He has turned from being a prestigious human rights defender into a blind ally of the Islamists. Thirdly, we propose the formation of an alternative national salvation government with the participation of all opposition parties, civil society groups and trade unions, particularly, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT). We do not accept the solution the Ennahda government is working towards, because we believe that any such government formed from or that includes Ennahda will not differ from one formed after the assassination of the Chokri Belaid, the ANC member who was assassinated earlier this year in February. Fourthly, we demand vigilante groups that became known as "revolution protection committees be disbanded.  


Following this proposal by the Tamaroud party, and with mediation by the Tunisia General Labor Union (UGTT), the Ennahda group agreed to relinquish power, revise the electoral commission, finalize the constitution, and agreed to appoint independent “caretaker” government until the new elections. Tunisia’s first parliamentary elections occurred under a new constitution in October 2014. The Ennahada party won a slight majority and promised to work in a coalition government with the rival party the liberal Nidaa Tounes (Tunisia’s Call).

The revolution in Tunisia has certainly not led to a smooth transition to democracy, but many officials still feel optimistic about progress because history has shown that setbacks are normal in democratic transitions. Government progress is being made by slowly changing laws and attitudes in the region, but additional time is needed for the government to transition to democracy. Human rights discussions are occurring, and even the once ignored topic of women


and minority rights is now being addressed.\textsuperscript{98} If you consider how far the country has come from the injustices that were occurring prior to the revolution, Tunisians have made tremendous strides in a short period of time.\textsuperscript{99}

In sum, journalists are turning to social media to find the most interesting and truthful stories. The footage and stories that came from social media sources served as a launch pad to gain international news media coverage and international leaders’ attention. This increased attention gave the movement trans-border legitimacy.\textsuperscript{100} Trans-border legitimacy is critical in a world that has become more networked than ever. As Alex Scott notes, “Since the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s, the world's networked population has grown from the low millions to the low billions. Over the same period, social media has become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors - regular citizens, activists, nongovernmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, governments.”\textsuperscript{101} The Tunisian revolution was


\textsuperscript{100} Alex Scott. "From First Tweet to Final Collapse - The Dimensions of Social Media in Regime Collapse." Paper presented at International Studies Association Annual Convention, April 2, 2012.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
the first time a group of people took advantage of all these networks to gain attention and change prevailing social norms.

On the other hand, the turbulence following the inspiring Tunisian revolution signaled to many people that the Arab spring was a failure, and that social media was not an aid in democratic change. Neither social media, nor any other network is a cure all solution. It is a tool, and a tool that if used correctly can add exposure, organization, and speed that have never been possible before. This tool has the power to change opinions and formulate norms that can lead to the growth in democratic liberties. Tunisia is not going to instantly become an ideal democracy just because its revolution seemingly occurred overnight. The government and the people need time to catch up to the technology.
Chapter 5: Case Study of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Background

During the 2011 Arab Spring, Egypt followed in Tunisia’s footsteps. Egyptians and Tunisians share a great deal. They both have a shared sense of collective identity, have majority Muslim population, share the common language of Arabic, and both are used to authoritarian governments that held power for decades leading up to the Arab Spring. Additionally, they are geographically near each other, both in North Africa and separated by Libya. In both Tunisia and Egypt, social media played pivotal roles in the first Arab Spring uprisings.

The commonalities mentioned sparked an Egyptian interest in the events unfolding in Tunisia. While both nations are similar, Egypt has historically played a more central role in the region and so its use of new media technology attracted international attention to the use of social media as a tool for democracy. However, Egypt’s unrest following its revolution highlights the fact that while new media technology provides a tool for widespread rapid change, it is not a solution in itself. The country continues to face a difficult future as it struggles to find a long term democratic solution to its turmoil. I will discuss how new media was used in Egypt’s

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revolution, Egypt’s subsequent difficulties, and the role new media technology could play in Egypt’s future.

A variety of factors contributed to the Egyptian protests and the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak came into power in 1967, initiating 30 years of repressive authoritarian rule. For much of this time, he oversaw a depressed economic climate, limited employment opportunities, unfree elections, and a political system in which “free” speech and assembly were controlled. His authoritarian control was continually enhanced at the expense of the citizens’ democratic liberties. For example in 2007 Mubarak promulgated 34 constitutional amendments furthering his power and reach. The amendments included powers, “to try civilians in military courts, revoke judicial supervision of parliamentary elections, and impose restrictions to prevent unaffiliated independents from running for office.” (These were usually Muslim Brotherhood Independents).\textsuperscript{103} According to the United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report in 2009, “about 20 percent of the Egyptian population lived below the poverty line.”\textsuperscript{104} Additionally, a large percentage of the youth were disaffected, with youth unemployment in 2010 at 43 percent, more than Tunisia’s youth unemployment of 30 percent;\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.

these statistics do not include those that were only able to find part time work or had given up looking for a job.105

Like all the leaders of the Arab spring after the protests erupted, Mubarak offered to have a national discussion, but when the protests intensified and impacted investment and tourism, all schools and universities were closed and the government attempted to regulate the internet. However, when forces were dispatched the army refused to fire on the protestors.106 After 18 days of protests organized via social media, Mubarak stepped down as President, leaving the military in charge of Egypt.107

How New Media was Used During the Egyptian Revolution

Even though Egypt’s economy was deteriorating, Egypt had substantially increased its information technology capabilities leading up to the revolution as part of a national campaign for socioeconomic development. This government initiative included low cost computers for citizens to purchase, and free Internet access at internet centers. Despite high unemployment


106 Ibid.

rates and a lack of democratic liberties, Egyptians were connected by new media outlets. Some estimate that leading up to the revolution in 2010 70 percent of the Egyptian population had a mobile phone subscription and 21 percent of Egypt’s 80 million population had internet access. 108

Similar to Bouazizi’s death in Tunisia, the death of Khaled Saeed created a social media uproar for the movement. Saeed was using an internet café when two police officers demanded money from him as a penalty for attempting to post material against the Egyptian police. After he told the officers that he did not have money to give to them, they brutally beat him on the street. Images of Khaled Saeed following the beating inspired the formation of a very influential group called “We are all Saeed.” The police claimed that he choked to death on drugs, but supporters of Saeed claimed he was killed for attempting to post a video of police exchanging money after a drug deal. Supporters claimed that Saeed was trying to expose the corruption in the Egyptian government. The social media campaign in Saeed’s name gained international attention. The news media and social media spread the story, and human rights groups rallied behind the supporters of the movement. 109

109 Ibid.
The nation was ripe for a revolution; new media just accelerated the speed of revolution, creating an 18-day revolution rather than the typical drawn out process of democratic revolutions in the past. During the Egyptian revolution conversations via social media about the need for a revolution often preceded major events. In the week preceding Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, for example, “the total rate of tweets from Egypt — and around the world — about political change in that country ballooned from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day. Videos featuring protest and political commentary went viral – the top 23 videos received nearly 5.5 million views. The amount of content produced online by opposition groups, in Facebook and political blogs, increased dramatically.”  

Wael Ghonim, the administrator of the “We Are All Khaled Saeed” Facebook page had written on Facebook before the revolution broke out that “Facebook, Twitter, and the Internet would change politics in Egypt.” But most people were skeptical of his idea.  

When the rebellion broke out in Tunisia, the Egyptians had the benefit of watching many events unfold before planning their own strategies. Egyptian bloggers on Twitter, Facebook, and personal blogs posted on behalf of Tunisians, disseminating images, videos, and information.

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videos, and information. Activists were able to work together in Tunisia and Egypt. Prior to the revolution a permit was needed for a gathering of five or more, but nevertheless thousands began to virtually gather online. According to Eltantawy and Wiest, the Egyptians utilized social media’s capacity for swift transmission of ideas and exchange of information.

The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions depended upon the level of resource mobilization. Resource mobilization is a concept described by Eltantawy and Wiest as “based on the notion that resources—such as time, money, organizational skills, and certain social or political opportunities—are critical to the success of social movements.” According to resource mobilization theory, the availability of resources and actors’ abilities to use them correctly is necessary for the success of social movements. This focuses on the importance of influences outside sociological motivators such as a feeling of group injustice or political ideas. New media technology’s use as a resource mobilization tool was vital to the revolutions in North Africa because it provided the necessary means to transmit the message.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.


115 Ibid.
During Egypt’s uprisings social media sites served various functions. Facebook was used to organize groups, whereas Twitter was used to spread quick bursts of information to a wider audience; Youtube provided more information and images to link with twitter posts. These sites not only served as sources for Egyptians, but for news outlets worldwide.  

During 2008 when the April 6th Youth Movement began, Facebook was one of the top 10 most visited sites in the Arab world and in Egypt was ranked the third most visited after Google and Yahoo. The April 6th Movement, “has its roots in Egypt’s brief burst of political freedom in 2005 and 2006, which came after the administration of George W. Bush put pressure on the Mubarak regime to hold its first multiparty election.” The movement had 70,000 members on Facebook, with members discussing issues such as free speech, economic stagnation and government nepotism, and ideas to improve life in Egypt. Via Facebook the movement also organized demonstrations over actions in Gaza and the jailing of journalists. The group also gave members a source of real time news and images, for example when a Muslim Brotherhood Web Site posted photographs of its protests in Alexandria over actions in Gaza, the Youth Movement


117 Ibid.

could follow the demonstrations’ progress and gain a personal perspective of events occurring on the streets. ¹¹⁹

The following chart breaks down the sources of social media content during the Egyptian Arab Spring. The figure shows that roughly 70 percent of the actors are individuals, thus demonstrating that new media was used as a tool for citizens to impact their government during the Arab Spring. ¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Gilad Lotan describes his findings by noting that,

- Other (individuals) 26.9%
- Blogger 16.7%
- Journalist 14.4%
- Activist 12.3%
- BOT (automated programs for organizational interests) 6%
- MSM (mainstream media) 7.3%
- Non Media Org 4.3%
- Web News Org 3.8%
- Researcher 2.4%
- Celeb 1.9%
- Digerati (online communities) 2.5%
- Political Actor 1.5%

Source: Lothan (2011)
an organization's Twitter account plays a different role than an individual account, often serving as the official voice of a group, company, or organization...Organization accounts are the following: MSM, Non-media org, Web news org, and Bots (which in many cases are controlled by automated programs representing non-individual interests). All other actor types are considered individual accounts. In comparing organization accounts to individual accounts in our datasets, we found that roughly 70% of the actors in each dataset are individuals.121

Leaders in Egypt utilized Facebook’s event feature often used for birthdays and social gatherings. One event was titled "The Day of the Revolution Against Torture, Poverty, Corruption and Unemployment."122 According to Facebook, over 80,000 invitees clicked “yes” to indicate attendance and many clicked “maybe,” probably out of fear of a government crack down on those planning to attend, because according to the actual turnout numbers many that clicked “maybe” clearly meant “yes.”123 Instructions were clearly spelled out for the protest: “Stand 5 feet apart, so as not to break Egyptian laws against public demonstrations; be absolutely silent; no signs; wear black, as determined in an online vote; stand on the banks of the river or sea for one hour only,

121 Ibid.


123 Ibid.
then walk away.”124 One of the most famous protests organized in support of Khaled Saeed via Facebook was not organized by the administrators, but by someone posting comments on the group’s wall, creating a true peoples’ movement. The comments inspired the protestors in Alexandria (Saeed’s hometown) to wear black along the banks in a silent flash mob following the group’s non-violent protest rules. 125

Another vital source of communication for the Egyptian revolution was Google email and google chat, since the server does not allow outsiders to trace computers’ IP addresses. The inability to trace IP addresses kept the organizers and participants identities safe if they were to remain anonymous.126

In 2012, three Egyptian social media activists were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, Wael Ghonim, Asmaa Mahfouz, and Israa Abdel Fattah.127 Two have already been mentioned. Asmaa Mahfouz was the founding member of the April 6th Movement, who

124 Ibid.


126 Ibid.

famously wrote on Facebook that, “she was going to Cairo's Tahrir Square and urged all those who wanted to save the country to join her.”

Mahfouz tried to recreate the same energy from social media that she saw in the Tunisian Revolution. At Tahir Square she and many followers from her Facebook group shouted, "Egyptians, four people set themselves on fire out of humiliation and poverty. Egyptians, four people set fire to themselves because they were afraid of the security agencies, not of the fire. Four people set fire to themselves in order to tell you to awaken. We are setting ourselves on fire so that you will take action. Four people set themselves on fire in order to say to the regime: Wake up. We are fed up." The video of this event instantaneously was circulated through social media outlets and attracted worldwide news media attention to the Egyptian protests.

The Situation Today

Encarnación perceives Egypt’s failure to build a stable democracy is not a result of the failure of new media technology, but the failure of a civil society coup to transition to a


129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.
government that grants long term democratic liberties. Civil society coups are defined by him as “entailing the removal from power of an elected leader through sustained protest, usually with the aid of the military.” According to him there are several conditions necessary for a civil society coup:

The rise of a leader who is not completely dedicated to ensuring democratic liberties, a political system that fails to meet the public expectations for national economic growth and stability usually because of internal corruption...and a civil society coup utilizes trade unions, religious organizations, and civic groups, rather then political organizations (that have either not developed or fallen apart).

Civil society coups were seen in Egypt and several other nations, and have been associated with citizens having few democratic liberties and a corrupt government. The conditions created by Egypt’s civil society coup show that “a frustrated civil society, a delegitimized political system, and a lack of law create conditions that make it difficult for a long term stable democracy to occur.”


132 Ibid.

133 Ibid.

Egypt has exemplified the civil society coup. Egypt has failed to democratize in the aftermath of the revolution under the leadership of President Mohammed Morsi, the first president to come to power following the revolution, extended his power under the cover of a “state of emergency” to enforce his legitimacy. He cracked down on women’s rights, gave more power to the military (which enforced his leadership), and granted himself extrajudicial powers. His leadership and government conduct differed little from Mubarak’s. Egyptians’ living conditions in many ways were worse under Morsi than Mubarak, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reported, “before the revolution, 40 percent of the country lived in poverty. Now, 50 percent do.”\(^\text{135}\) The economy did not improve under Morsi; his policies discouraged private investment because his government was seen as unstable. Taxes were high as were transactions costs, business people encountered a great deal of red tape, and the tourism sector struggled to attract visitors to the hostile country.\(^\text{136}\)

After having fought for democracy and change, Egyptians felt betrayed by Morsi. Once again new media technology gave Egyptians a platform to swiftly display the government’s ineffectiveness, and oust Morsi but this also further solidified Egypt’s image of being unstable to

\(^{135}\) Ibid.

\(^{136}\) Ibid.
tourists and possible investors, thus increasing the country’s economic troubles. This time Egyptians worked with the military, and communicated via social media to oust Morsi in July 2013. The current President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi is now presiding under a new constitution. The previous constitution that was greatly influenced by Morsi was seen as too Islamist.

Egypt continues to face social unrest, and the growing threat of terrorism. The Islamic militant group Isis or Isil (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Islamic State) has an Egyptian splinter group that has been waging a war against Egyptian security forces. Isis is known “for killing dozens of people at a time and carrying out public executions, crucifixions and other acts. It has taken over large swaths of northern and western Iraq. The group currently controls hundreds of square miles. It ignores international borders and has a presence from Syria's Mediterranean coast to south of Baghdad. It rules by Sharia law.” Isis was responsible for an assault on an Egyptian army checkpoint that killed 30 troops. The attack led Egypt’s National Defense council to declare a three-month state of emergency in the areas near Israel and the

137 Ibid.


Gaza Strip. 140 Attacks have also spread to other parts of Egypt, Isis has targeted police in Cairo and the Nile Delta. The government has blamed the Muslim Brotherhood, leading to over 20,000 arrests and several deaths. 141

Conclusion

Regardless of its limitations, such as its inability by itself to foster a long term democratic stability, new media technology has its uses in today’s democratic revolutions. Eira Martens conducted a study on social media’s role in Egypt’s 2011 Arab Spring Revolution and found that “in addition to helping organize protests, social media - in particular shared photos and videos - allowed participants to form a collective identity. This increased a sense of solidarity and helped lower a fear threshold that may otherwise have prevented people from taking to the streets.”142 Another one of Martens’s conclusions was that social media helped to compress the time frame of the uprising. "In the Egyptian context, Facebook in particular helped accelerate the protests," Martens said of her research results. "The majority of the social media activists I interviewed


141 Ibid.

believe that it would have taken a few more years to overthrow Mubarak's government,” she added.  

In the Egyptian Arab spring it was the rapid transfer of information by new media that made the revolution happen in an expedited manner. The Egyptian government fought back by suspending the accounts of bloggers and activist sites on Facebook. They tried to overload websites with fake reports, but website operators deleted the fake reports or opened new accounts to keep information flowing. The government attempts would happen for a minute every few hours throughout the revolution, until the government gave up trying to stop the internet feed. Diamond and Plattner note that the speed at which revolutionaries were able to stop government attempts to slow progress was new to social movement history.  

Since the initial Arab Spring uprisings new media has not only become a tool for the common citizen, but for everyone involved in government. Prominent politicians now blog, tweet, and utilize new media as tools to spread their opinions and thoughts. Mohammed Morsi blogged throughout his term and collapse. Additionally, new media gives politicians a new arena to be heard, and new leaders are able to find a base by communicating directly with citizens.

143 Ibid.

Social media’s influence continues to spread in Egypt; it is now used by ordinary citizens, as well as political parties, government actors, and NGOs. However, individuals are still the drivers of new media no matter what the goal. Twitter now has a beta translation tool, making messages viewable in many languages around the world. Thus although Morsi’s final tweet was in Arabic, this new feature on Twitter made a translation to numerous languages instantaneously available, making his perspective and opinion available to everyone around the world.¹⁴⁵

As Sonya Diehn states, this broadening of public debate can lead to a more democratic exchange of ideas and to social change in the real world.¹⁴⁶

Finally in Egypt’s 2011 Arab Spring revolution, social media’s communication speed created new norms, changing the way in which movements are organized and information is spread. New norms are formed “independently to adapt to various unique domestic situations which enable the critical mass of a domestic audience to internalize the new ideals and norms.”¹⁴⁷ During the Egyptian revolution, individuals helped to disseminate new norms for social change by using new media technology, focusing on human rights, and recognizing that global news media was watching. In accord with Finnemore and Sikkink’s study of norms, notes

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Alex Scott, social media created,

A useful framework to provide insight into the role an alerted Western public and government played in persuading the Tunisian and Egyptian governments to behave responsibly, and not react violently towards the protesters. These norms were also able to help protect the physical integrity of the protesters from brutal government repression.148

New media today is fostering interdependence between countries and citizens at every level by keeping people connected in real time. As a result of globalization, problems that occur in any country will soon turn into everyone else’s problems, and those events can be known and understood more quickly and fully than ever before. Egypt has long stood as a cultural and political leader in the Arab world. Egypt’s policies often set the tone for the rest of the region. While ousting Mubarak has proved not to be a cure all solution to Egypt’s troubles, it did open the door for a while to a more participatory government, and empowered ordinary citizens. It is likely that the speedy removal of Mubarak would not have been possible without new media’s facilitation of the protests.149

148 Ibid.

Chapter 6: Case Study – Social Media and Changes in China

Background

China has a unique relationship with social media. At a glance, China’s social media scene seems to be non-existent with Facebook often shut down, Twitter banned, and Youtube forbidden. However, social media is prospering in China through non-traditional channels. One study found that 513 million people use the internet in China, and China has the world’s most active social media groups with over 300 million users spending around 40 percent of their time on social media. The social sites range from online communities, to blogs, micro blogs, and social networking sites.\(^{150}\) China’s social media users are not primarily on a few networks, like users from western nations who predominately use Facebook and Twitter. China has many social networks that are fragmented and often locally based. Active social media users in China exceed 100 million, with most using social media through mobile devices.\(^{151}\)


\(^{151}\) Ibid.
To better control China’s huge flow of information on the web, the government constructed a “great firewall.” However, the government’s firewall has been quite easily circumvented by Chinese citizens wanting to share information. Indeed, despite the government’s heavy censorship China has been ahead of much of the world in social media development,

Chinese users were able to embed multimedia content in social media more than 18 months before Twitter users could do so in the United States. Social media began in China in 1994 with online forums and communities and migrated to instant messaging in 1999. User review sites such as Dianping emerged around 2003. Blogging took off in 2004, followed a year later by social-networking sites with chatting capabilities such as Renren. and Sina Weibo launched in 2009, offering microblogging with multimedia. Location-based player Jiepang appeared in 2010, offering services similar to foursquare’s.  

China has seen a huge economic transformation in the past 25 years; it has been averaging 9.5 percent growth over two decades. China’s prosperity based on its adaption of a capitalist economy, has given citizens wealth, private property, and choice in life style, in where they live, and what they would like to do with their lives. It is interesting that in 2008, 51,000

152 Ibid.


businesses conducted polls for various reasons. The government officials are also, using popular opinion polls to assist in making decisions, which marks a huge shift in how leaders make decisions.\textsuperscript{155} The government has referenced public opinion polls to defend their policies on taxes, infrastructure, and exchange rates.\textsuperscript{156}

Students who go abroad for education in democratic nations are returning to China and creating private sector jobs that traditionally were only done by the state. This growing private sector in China is becoming more influential in Chinese policy. For example the Institute of Public Affairs, an organization run by many Chinese citizens who have received their education abroad, has pressured many companies to change some of their polluting policies. This is an example of an organization that is not government run impacting company policies, something that would have been unheard of 10 years ago.\textsuperscript{157} The new private sector in China has been expanding and networking through the internet and social media applications.\textsuperscript{158}

China’s great urbanization push, which has pushed rural Chinese populations into cities,
has been associated with increasing income levels, education, elevated government expectations, and easier communication.\textsuperscript{159} The government has now realized that it is incredibly difficult to both gain economically from the benefits of the internet and to stop the internet’s flow of information. The Chinese government is now mostly fighting the spread of information, not by trying to stop the information, but by countering ideas with the government’s perspective and justification.\textsuperscript{160} One example of many occurred when rumors circulated via social media regarding a Communist Party of China (CCP) official named Bo Xilai (the Former Chinese Minister of Commerce and Party Chief of Chongqing). The rumors about Bo Xilai suggested that he was involved in revealing details about the murder of a British businessman and a Chinese cover up to the United States. In reaction to the rumors, the Chinese government actually released the court testimony of Bo Xilai via social media to silence the talk on the web. \textsuperscript{161}

China’s changes in growth and communication have empowered people, but have also led to anger and frustration when the government tries to play a large role in controlling the Chinese population’s personal liberties. China has a capitalist economy coupled with a

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
communist government which does not respect Western calls for democratic rights. The system
does not seem sustainable in its current form and widespread frustration has been felt among
Chinese citizens. The ability of many Chinese citizens to spread information explaining their
frustrations while circumventing government controls has given the CCP a great deal of anxiety.
Robert Dahl claimed that “a highly favorable condition for democratic institutions is a market
economy in which economic enterprises are mainly owned privately, and not by the state, that is,
a capitalist rather than a socialist or statist economy.” China is showing signs of the
precondition described by Dahl with the increase in privately owned business and property.

Protests, or what the government refers to as “mass incidents,” are common in China.
Mass incidents occur over a range of issues from pollution to real estate grabs and labor
conditions. Most are small, but sometimes larger ones occur that attract national attention. Environmental protests have gathered a significant amount of attention. There has been outcry
over smog, new petrochemical plants, and the policies of the China National Petroleum


China National Petroleum is a state owned oil and gas company. The company received public backlash over the lack of safety regulation after several gas leaks and oil spills recurred, which put many citizens in danger and caused several deaths.\textsuperscript{165}

**Use of Social Media**

Social media in China is a vast enterprise with a high level of participation. Weibo (run by internet company Sina) is similar to Twitter and includes a large number of businesses and celebrities who micro-blog. Weibo has been extremely popular in China with 200 million users, mostly mobile based.\textsuperscript{166} Tencent Weibo is a similar service with about 200-250 million users.\textsuperscript{167} WeiXin is very similar to the western WhatsApp allowing users to text and exchange voicemails with 100 million users.\textsuperscript{168} Douban is very customized and has many special interest


\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
communities; the site is most similar to the Western Myspace website with over 100 users.\textsuperscript{169} Xionei, with over 100 million users, is similar to the western website Classmates, connecting school friends.\textsuperscript{170} Wexin is a social network tool that lets users exchange news, photos, videos, and links similar to the United States’ WeChat. In three years the app has been used by over 300 million people.\textsuperscript{171} WK News online is based out of Hong Kong and informs citizens of events that are generally ignored by traditional media. The site has a mostly labor focus and has followers from all sections of society.\textsuperscript{172} WK News has over 5,000 likes on Facebook and many fan pages.\textsuperscript{173}

China has tried to crackdown on social media activism. For example, Wang Lihong was a social media activist who was arrested after she helped organize a demonstration in front of a

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
court house in Fuzhou, China via social media networks.\textsuperscript{174} The demonstration was in support of three bloggers who were on trial after helping a woman, via social media, reinvestigate her daughter’s death.\textsuperscript{175} Wang Lihong had repeatedly used social media in China to advocate (not just the court house demonstration), mainly helping people with grievances against the government. The government retaliated by sentencing the 56 year old woman to 9 months in prison for “stirring up trouble”; however her courtroom scene was recorded, blogged, and spread throughout social media by the time she had left the courtroom thanks to her son.\textsuperscript{176} The story encouraged others to follow her example in blogging for human rights.

Sina Weibo microblogging has been focused on environmental criticism. One example was when the building of the Harbin power plant caused air pollution in the area. The Twitter-like Sina Weibo microblogging site displayed countless angry posts over the pollution and its effects on the area. Authorities at the time let the passionate environmental posts remain on Sina Weibo, but that has since changed, and the government has started to crack down on

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\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.

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environmental activist postings. Environmental issues have gained a great deal of interest in recent years, as grassroot organizations have started up social media sites such as Weibo, and many online forums. As Tan notes, they have changed the way the Chinese traditionally organized movements (that is through labor unions, political parties, and NGOs), organizing instead via fluid virtual networks.

In July 2014 over 500 people were arrested in Hong Kong for attending a pro-democracy rally attended by thousands marking the anniversary of the Chinese assumption of control of Hong Kong from Britain. The protest was sparked by the growing erosion of democratic freedoms Hong Kong citizens once enjoyed. The protestors called for a “civil nomination” of their own representation rather than Beijing’s appointed and approved candidates. The majority of the protestors were younger than those protesting in previous Hong Kong

177 Ibid.


demonstrations. The protestors organized via social media networks because they were skeptical of mainstream media and Chinese legal compromises.  

Occupy Central with Love and Peace is a Hong Kong based social media group with a large following. The Occupy group played a large part in the July 2014 protest in Hong Kong and they have filled the streets once again. Occupy Central with Love and Peace leader Benny Tai in July 2014 described his tactics as follows: “If the government refuses to seriously consider the demand, this group of people, more of them will change from sympathetic to active support, and the sympathetic people may also start all kinds of noncooperative actions, and just think about, how can a government govern if the whole society refuses to cooperate with you?”

Conclusion

U.S. Senator John McCain once said: “the Arab Spring is coming to China.” While Senator McCain did not have a set time and date for when the revolution would take place, Stephen Platt makes the case that China is ripe for another revolution, by examining China’s history and recent revolutions around the world (such as the Arab Spring revolutions) that have

\[181\] Ibid.

\[182\] Ibid.

shown similar patterns of communication leading to revolutions.\(^{184}\) He notes that China today shows a lot of similarities to the China prior to the Taiping Rebellion, a rebellion which almost overthrew the Qing Dynasty which ruled from 1850-1864.\(^{185}\) According to Platt, the revolt was characterized by spontaneity, and swift speed, and lacked the usual years of groundwork leading to the revolution.\(^{186}\) The participants were poor workers, impoverished farmers, and out of work miners.\(^{187}\) Platt concludes: “The revolt, which claimed at least 20 million lives before it was quelled, making it the bloodiest civil war in history, suggests caution for those who hope for a popular uprising — a Chinese Spring — today.” \(^{188}\)

Governments stay in power through legitimacy. John Locke believed that man was “by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent.”\(^{189}\) He meant that it is only by popular

\(^{184}\) Ibid.

\(^{185}\) Ibid.

\(^{186}\) Ibid.

\(^{187}\) Ibid.

\(^{188}\) Ibid.

consent that leaders can govern. They lose legitimacy when citizens no longer feel that they are
serving their interests. Governing without legitimacy in China has historically led to instability,
in many cases revolutions, and massive changes in the government. In an attempt to sustain
government legitimacy, the CCP has shown signs that it is becoming more responsive to citizens’
wants and needs. For example, democratic, polling systems are now used to measure
government performance and the needs of the people. This is a sign of a changing and more
democratic China.

The Chinese government is becoming more responsive to citizens’ voices via the internet,
such as what happened in the case of Bo Xilai rumors. The governmental attempts to listen and
address citizens’ concerns open the door to democratic liberties, but the Chinese government is
still far from respecting democratic rights. China has many problems that will only become
more severe if significant changes allowing more democratic rights are not made. According to
David Lampton, Beijing will need to expand democratic liberties to Chinese citizens if it hopes
to keep its legitimacy as a government. China does not necessarily need a full democratic
government, but democratic liberties such as “local political participation, official transparency,
more independent judicial and anti corruption bodies, an engaged civil society, institutional
checks on executive power, and legislative and civil institutions to channel the country’s diverse
interests”¹⁹⁰ will be necessary for China’s middle class to continue to prosper.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Revolutions have occurred throughout history, and the channels of communication used to promote them have evolved as technology advances. This research has described how new media, which comprises social media and the internet, is playing an increasingly important role as a tool for communication, organization, and information. This new source of communication has created a new public sphere. Public spheres have evolved from coffee houses and printed pamphlets, to radio communication, and now to virtual gatherings. Social media’s fluid and rapid structure has increased the speed by which revolutions occur and it increases the importance of a quick government response as well as government changes if a government would like to remain in place.

Tunisia’s revolution has produced a democratic government, despite set backs experienced in Tunisia during its transitional period. The sacrificial act of Mohammad Bouazizi would not have inspired widespread protests and action as quickly if it had not been distributed

via new media channels. The blogging and social media communications by countless citizen journalists who posted videos, images, and real time news on social media sites, such the YouTube video of President Ben Ali’s wife’s departing in her private jet to indulge in one of her many high priced and luxurious shopping excursions were big moments for the movement.  

Additionally the social media leaders of the Tunisian revolution, Lina Ben Mhenni (also know as “Astrubal”) was highly effective in utilizing the new public sphere of social media to inspire and organize protests that proved to be a vital tool in the Tunisian revolution.

Egypt’s use of new media technology attracted more international attention to social media as a tool for democracy. The death of Khaled Saeed (similar to Bouazizi’s death in Tunisia) gained worldwide attention through social media, particularly the “We are all Saeed” Facebook group. Wael Ghonim, Asmaa Mahfouz, and Israa Abdel Fattah were all instrumental in the Egyptian revolution; they played such an important role in organizing non-violent protests that all three were nominated for Nobel Peace Prizes. Asmaa Mahfouz’s “Wake up. We are


“fed up” video inspired Egyptians to join the movement and attracted worldwide news media coverage. However Egypt’s unrest following their revolutions showed that while new media technology provides a tool for widespread rapid change, it is not a solution in itself.

China’s extraordinary number of social media users, combined with their rapidly expanding economy have opened China to the world, and highlighted a pressing need for democratic rights for its citizens. China has tried to keep social media and the internet monitored and heavily controlled, but it has proven to be a difficult task. This was also true in Tunisia and Egypt where citizens were able to easily circumvent the government controls. Wang Lihong’s prison sentence video distributed via social media, and countless other examples of Chinese bloggers and social media activists using multiple channels of communication demonstrate that Chinese citizens can circumvent government regulation and promote differing government perspectives. According to democratic peace theory, democratic nations work cooperatively with other nations because they have mutual interests. As China advances its democratic rights this could lead to a more cooperative world.


195 Ibid.

I began my paper by arguing that the use of social media has made today's revolutions more likely to succeed, because the progressive sharing of information has made it increasingly difficult to silence people, control the growth and organization of groups, and for leaders to ignore the masses and keep their populations completely controlled. My case studies have shown that social media is indeed useful for revolutions in today’s world. It is a tool for sparking democratic change and in that respect it makes revolutions succeed. However, this does not mean that those revolutions will actually lead to long-term democracy. The long term results of the Arab Spring revolutions and China’s utilization of social media are unknown. Further research into this field will be necessary to further assess the correlation between the two areas. However, despite the unknown futures of these nations, it can be said that the use of new media as a tool has made democratic revolutions easier, faster, and more likely to occur in the future.
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