

An Analysis upon Various Influences of Social Media on Social Movements: Recent Prospect

Amit Ganpat Gorkhe^{1*} Dr. Arun Kumar Singh²

¹Sociology, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith

²Sociology, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith

Abstract – This report investigates the impact of social media upon social movement is designed to test the common hypothesis that Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets had a significant impact on the outbreak of protests. These case studies focus on protesters' use of social media, how social movement theory explains the role of social media, or other traditional methods of mobilization in these countries, governments' use of social media to monitor and counter activists, and the role of social media in influencing international policy. The authors then develop two quantitative models, one to explore the correlation between protest activity and social media usage at the individual level, and the other to provide a forecast of the likelihood of social unrest given a certain set of country-level factors.

----- X -----

INTRODUCTION

The potential effects of social media are manifold: social media may have facilitated the dialogue amongst a network of activists who were then able to instigate calls for reform; social media may also have directly helped in protesters' ability to organize and coordinate their activities. In quickly disseminating not only information but sensational pictures and video clips, social media played an important role in attracting both national and international attention to protesters' plights and subsequently swaying international opinion and policy. At the same time, social media also allowed for greater government efforts to monitor organizers' online activities, coordinate the suppression of these endeavors, and thwart protesters' goals.

Every facet of our life is touched by the social media today. The historic invisible walls of the internet are being broken down daily. The currency of social media isn't dollar, euro or yuan, but engagement, participation and value creation. The winners in this information age are empowered citizens, good governance, good products and good democratic practices. But social media has a flip side as well. As Time magazine in its cover story wrote some time ago, "Social media is making you stupid". Our personal privacy has become the victim of this digital empowerment. As American artist Andy Warhole aptly puts it, "in the future we will all have 15 minutes of privacy."

Any new technology or tool evokes both excitement and skepticism. For, new technologies and systems

have the potential to disrupt and alter the way we live our lives.

Technology is double-edged. There are reasons to cheer as also to despair. Social media has grown rapidly because it serves various social needs. It has also grown because of the increasing importance of networking. Social networking sites (Facebook), micro blogging services (Twitter), content sharing sites (You Tube, Flickr) have introduced the opportunity for large scale online social participation. Barrack Obama was perhaps the first leader who understood the importance of social media by leveraging it to mobilize the young and the old alike to go from an unknown Senator in 2004 to the most powerful man in the world four years later.

Thanks to social media we no longer search for the news, the news finds us. Thanks to web technologies, voices previously excluded from conversations can now find a channel, and organize themselves with a far greater degree of influence than before. They can probe into the credentials of expert journalists and share emails which show how academia is every bit as politicized as the rest of the world.

In some sense, social media has emerged as the alternative media. It is giving voice to the 'voiceless' and the underdogs. Social movements have existed in various forms for millennia. But the internet offers a new way for aggrieved groups. People have decided not to wait for the revolution to start living differently. Thanks to a combination of economic, social and

political crises, people now want to take control of their lives.

A social movement is a social process through which collective actors articulate their interests, voice grievances and critiques, and proposed solutions to identified problems by engaging in a variety of collective actions. These movements have three features: 1) they are conflictual and have clearly identified (ideological) opponents; 2) they are structured through dense informal networks; and 3) they are geared towards developing, sustaining and sharing collective identities (della Porta and Diani, 2006)

The emergence of digital networked technologies has led to the convergence of channels of distribution and communication formats including social media. The profound impact of networked technologies on societies economically, socially and politically has led some to claim that we have entered a new era of the Information, Network or Knowledge Society. The emergence of the Internet has resulted in a polarized scholarly debate about the impact and normative consequences of ICTs and social media, in particular. In this entry ICTs are referred so as to include mobile communication and the Internet which support social media platforms. However, even sceptics of the potential of ICTs to fundamentally alter power relations in society acknowledge the opportunities for disadvantaged groups to self-represent themselves, communicate independently and organise transnationally. Social media are playing an increasingly constitutive role in organizing social movements and in mobilizing on a global level.

A large segment of the literature in this area focuses on whether, how and to that extent, networked technologies and social media platforms are related to the mobilization for, and the organisation of, contentious politics with an emphasis on five themes:

- 1) Types of usage and forms of communicative practices
- 2) Roles and functions of social media
- 3) Networks, ties and the relational
- 4) Opportunities and structural constraints
- 5) Online spaces as a field of contention

Some studies focus on identifying the types of use of social media by social movements and activists and the variety of media and communicative practices that are being developed. These practices serve certain functions and fulfill certain roles in support of organising, coordinating and engendering social change. These developments have an impact on social networks and social ties which are important to understand to make sense of the relational aspects of mobilization and organisation. Researchers often

examine the specific affordances and constraints associated with the use of social media the conflicts over, for example, online privacy.

Social media play an important role in facilitating the mobilization for, and coordination of, direct actions offline. An overemphasis on the Internet is present in some studies and mobile technologies and text messaging often play a very important role (Gillan, et al., 2008). For example, SMS and mobile phones played a role in mobilisations against Philippine President Joseph – ‘Erap’ – Estrada, leading to his resignation in 2001 illustrating a substantial change in political communication and mobilisation in the Global South. Lowering the cost and increasing the efficiency of mobilization and coordination with a view to offline direct action is one of the main features of social networking sites and smart phones, enabling on-the-spot or in-real-time communicative practices.

Social media enable activists and protest movements to ‘self-mediate’ and to distribute movement goals or frames more easily. Social movements and activists have always done this, but social media are said to greatly increase the capacity to transmit text and visual discourses. It is often argued that social media potentially provide (new) opportunities for citizens and subordinate groups in society to bypass state and market controls and the mainstream media to construct alternative collective identities.

In addition, social media tools can potentially facilitate internal debate among activists. Online forums and mailing lists are used extensively and these tools are considered an integral part of many movements, to the extent that some have started to use online platforms and forums for decision-making (Gillan, et al., 2008: 157). This has been studied mainly from the perspective of how online deliberation has the potential to strengthen the public sphere.

In this way, social movements transfer knowledge and can influence future movements through what is called *movement spillover*. The protests in Tunisia spreading to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria are an example as is the rapid diffusion of the occupation of symbolic public spaces as a direct action in the Arab World spreading to the indigenous in Spain, to the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere with the Occupy movement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social movement theories provide a helpful framework for understanding how individuals mobilize themselves in order to overcome collective action problems and for explaining individual variation in movement participation.¹⁹ Using these theories, we hope to draw conclusions about the causal mechanisms that drove individuals in particular MENA countries to engage in different degrees of protest participation during the Arab Spring. Social movement theory also provides

further context to the impact social media had as a method of facilitation.

Another key mechanism in the formation of social movements is the nature of the conversations in which individuals engage during coalition formation.³¹ The authors identify the use of “compartmentalizing mechanisms” as a means by which organizers foster connections to a broader range of identities. This is easily accomplished by focusing on a narrow scope of identities shared by many, such as that of ‘youth,’ and by limiting the proposed timeframe of the coalition in order to alleviate concerns that participants are entering a constraining long-term agreement.³² “Conflation mechanisms” are used in a similar manner to establish a broad base of support through focusing on the “lowest common denominator” by playing up common identities while downplaying differences.

In turning to social media and its effectiveness as a medium for social movement mobilization, there is a mixed review on whether it has had a negative or positive impact. Melissa Lerner highlights the negative effects attributed to Internet use by some social movement theorists: the Internet’s provision of information alone does not produce sufficient social capital and community ties for sustained social movement activity geared towards democratization. Rather, increased access to online information by the public, combined with the often unregulated ability to publish a wide variety of information, can actually lead to an oversupply of confusing, inaccurate and distracting information. In addition, the replacement of real-world, face-to-face communication decreases solidarity and consensus-building that is critical to social movements.³⁴ However, she argues that the combination of web-based organizing and social movements, in which members participate both online and in the real world, can be very effective.³⁵ Also, in a politically repressive climate, cyberspace can facilitate alternate avenues for expression that reduce some of the risks of public activism and can also provide otherwise unavailable information to encourage dissident sentiments or anti-government action.

Study on the usage of social media in stimulating social movements has only begun to surface in the last decade. Although social media is a relatively young phenomenon in our world, works on social movement and collective action has been around as early as the 1960s, providing scholars with important information in order to understand the impact of social media as an organizational tool (Leenders & Heydemann 2012). While most of these studies have focused on specific case studies – particularly in the Middle East following the ‘Arab Spring’ – to demonstrate how social media facilitated and promoted social movements, none show a worldwide view of its impact in the mobilization process. This paper reviews the hypothesis in the

literature looking at the conditions to which people organize while focusing on social media as the best vehicle for mobilization and part of the macro-level picture of the process.

Clay Shirky (2011) is one of the early scholars to write about social media as a new social networking tool for collective action. He argues that over the years, the world communication system has gotten denser, more complex, and more participatory. People have gained greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and thus, an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.

The mobilizing structures discussed in the previous section – social networks and the media – provided five key aspects to the formation of social movements. These were: communication, organization, mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement. All of these characteristics are still relevant and important today. In fact, Shirky argues that social media replaced the old mobilization structures and became the new coordinating tool for nearly all of the world’s popular movements in the recent years, because of its ability to encompass all of these characteristics. First, “social media introduces speed and interactivity that were lacking in the traditional mobilization techniques, which generally include the use of leaflets, posters, and faxes” (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011). Facebook and Twitter are able to reach millions of people from all over the world as events are happening. The diffusion of information between different countries through traditional media outlets generally takes longer than information going through social media.

Social media has also provided new sources of information that cannot be easily controlled by authoritarian regimes (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Shirky writes that a condition of “shared awareness” in a population that experiences discontent with its current situation creates what he calls the dictator’s or conservative dilemma – which can also happen in democratic regimes. The dilemma is created when access to new media, such as social media, increase public access to speech or assembly. A state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public’s. The traditional response would be censorship and propaganda; however, neither is completely effective in silencing citizens with access to social media.

METHODOLOGY

In order to test whether social movements are caused by opportunity structures conditioned by social media I test a negative binomial regression. Negative binomial regressions are used for modeling count variables such as the dependent variable I am using

for my models. I regress measures of social movements on measures of economic, institutional, and social well-being, as well as access to social media, media freedom, and mobile technology. Table 1 reports the central tendencies for all variables.

Variables	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Range
Protests	1073.5	204	3659.6	63482
Facebook	21.9	18.4	18.2	70.8
Internet Penetration	33.2	25.9	28.3	95.8
Life Expectancy	68.5	72.15	10.7	54
Inflation	6.5	4.9	6.5	72.4
GDP per capita	12,661.9	4,433.8	18,707.5	114,025.6
Political Effectiveness	0.9	1	1	3
Political Legitimacy	1.1	1	1	3
Press Freedom	49.5	51	23.6	88
Mobile Subscriptions	85.8	89.6	42.2	198.94

Table 1. Variables central tendencies.

I measure Social Movements by the number of protests in every country. Data for the dependent variable comes from the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT), which consists of a count of all demonstrations, rallies, violent protests, and riots in all countries for 2008-2012 (<http://gdeltdallas.edu>). These civilian demonstrations and collective action focus on leadership change, policy change, civil rights, and regime or institutional change. The data report the number of occurrences in each state.

I measure social media in two different ways. First, I use the number of Facebook accounts worldwide. Among all of the existing social networks (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr) I use Facebook to represent all social media outlets primarily because it is the leading social networking service, and also due to the availability of data on other social networking websites (Clark 2012). The data comes from the Internet World Stats for the percentages of Facebook users in all countries in 2012 (www.internetworldstats.com), and it ranges from 0.05 percent to 70.9 percent. Due to the availability of data I am only able to find the number of Facebook accounts for 2012. Therefore, in order to have a larger scope of the effect of time on social movements, I will also be using the Internet penetration rate from 2008-2012 worldwide as a proxy variable for all social networking websites in order to test a time-series model. The data comes from the World Bank dataset (data.worldbank.org), and it ranges from 0.16 percent to 96 percent.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The tremendous expansion of the Internet during the 21st century, as well as the development and spread of sophisticated mobile phone technology, has enabled and promoted the unprecedented growth of

social media, generally considered to be any web-based or mobile communications technology that allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

Scholars have classified social media into six categories: open-source, collaborative projects, blogs and micro-blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds.³ In this project we focus on the social media that was most commonly used in the Arab Spring – namely blogs, social networking sites, and content communities.

Facebook is the largest and most ubiquitous social networking website on the Internet today. Developed in 2003, Facebook has since expanded significantly; the company opened its international headquarters in 2008 with an active user base of 100 million, and now boasts a user base of 845 million as of December 2011.⁴ More than 75 percent of these users are located outside the US. Facebook users can create personal, group, and event pages and then post photos, videos, and text entries to other pages as well as chat in real-time, exchange private messages, and share longer notes with other users.

Twitter, launched in 2006, is a popular social networking and micro-blogging service by which users can send and receive text-based posts of up to 140 characters, known informally as “tweets.” While it was launched several years ago, Twitter has expanded most rapidly in recent months; as of August 2011 Twitter generated over 200 million tweets a day, up from 65 million the year before.

YouTube is currently the largest online content community, allowing its users to watch and share originally created videos. Since its launch in November 2005, YouTube had reached over 700 billion playbacks by 2010, with 70 percent of its traffic coming from outside the United States. Every day, more than 3 billion videos are viewed and 8 years’ worth of video content uploaded.

Blogs first emerged in 1998-1999 with the creation of Open Diary, LiveJournal, and blogger.com. By 2004, blogging had become relatively mainstream in American politics and news. With growing Internet penetration and usage around the world, blogs soon sprung up elsewhere. The Arab blogosphere has gained increasing political relevance since 2005, when blogs first had a discernible impact in influencing the rise of Egypt’s Kefaya movement, political protests in Bahrain, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, anti-corruption campaigns in Libya, and the 2006 Parliamentary elections in Kuwait.⁶ There have since been countless instances of Arab governments censoring, arresting, and even torturing anti-regime bloggers.

MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

It is often difficult to remember that students do not have the same formative experiences, have not lived through the same political events, and have not witnessed or participated in the same changes that we have. To remind myself of that, I begin each major movement that we study by asking students to jot down their first impressions of the movement and the questions they have about it. I encourage them to tell me how things look from their historical vantage point. I also ask how their impressions were formed (e.g., conversations with family, textbooks, etc). At the end of a unit, we discuss if and how their impressions of the movement have changed, what was most important to understand about it, and whether there are lessons for contemporary activists. In the class, the social movements covered were historical up until the unit about OWS. Meaning, there was no shared historical memory besides what we have been told. Because of our shared cultural memory of the 2011 Occupy protests, it was imperative to integrate Occupy into our semester's agenda. The study of social movements and the role that media has in shaping, contextualizing, and altering them is based largely on a traditional media. Traditional media is centralized, one-to-many in form, commercial, professionally-produced, and proprietary. Whereas, social media tends to be decentralized, many-to-many, nonmarket, peer-produced, nonproprietary, open-source platforms, commons based, and free or inexpensive in access and in distribution (Benkler, 1-32). Social media is multilaterally accessible to different groups of people with various levels of commitment; members and organizations are allowed to link and mobilize a virtual or physical reality (van de Donk, et al., 9). In turn, a social movement can respond quickly to challenges and be less dependent on traditional media to get its message out to a broad audience (11).

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the relationship between social media, as an organizational tool and pre-existing social, economic, and institutional conditions for the emergence of social movements across the globe. Although the Facebook model does not show a relationship between Facebook and protests, the Internet penetration model does prove that social media is a statistically significant predictor of protest activity. The model also provides support for some of the other relationships derived by theory on social movements.

In this paper both Facebook and Internet penetration served as a representation of all social media outlets. Perhaps a better way to operationalize this variable would be through a measure of all Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Blog accounts; however, data on membership to these websites are not readily

available to researchers due to certain infringements on these accounts. Since social media in general is such a new phenomenon in the world, it is also possible that there is a delay problem to this study in which the results have not completely reflected onto the data yet. For that reason, it would be interesting to see the growth in each of these numbers every year from the past decade and compare the results on the number of social movements across the globe.

The role of researchers will be to provide a better understanding and explanation in order to empirically test new and improved models for social movements. A solid understanding of the macro-level process of social movements is also important in order to predict and perhaps even induce such events.

REFERENCES

- Bhuiyan, Serajul. (2011). "Social Media and Its Effectiveness in the Political Reform Movement in Egypt." *Middle East Media Educator*, 1: pp. 14-20. Print.
- Clark, Eric. (2012). "Social Media & Social Movements: A qualitative study of Occupy Wall Street." *Södertörn University*.
- Della Porta, Donnatella and Diani, Mario (2006). *Social Movements: an introduction* – 2nd Edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Eltantawy, Nahed, & Wiest, Julie B. (2007). "Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory". *Journal of Communication* 5: pp. 1207-1224.
- Leenders, Reinoud, & Heydemann, Steven (2012). "Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers." *Mediterranean Politics* 17.2: pp. 139-59.
- Shirky, Clay. (2011). "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs* 90.1: pp. 28-41.
- Tufekci, Zeynep, & Wilson, Christopher. (2012). "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square." *Journal of Communication* 62: pp. 363-379.
- Van de Donk, Wim, Brian Loader, Paul Nixon, and Dieter Rucht, eds. (2004). "Introduction: Social Movements and ICTs." *Cyberprotest*. New York: Routledge. Print.

Van Laer, Jeroen and Van Aelst, Peter (2010).
'Internet and Social Movements Action
Repertoires: Opportunities and Limitations'.
Information, Communication & Society 13(8):
pp. 1146-71.

Corresponding Author

Amit Ganpat Gorkhe*

Sociology, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith

E-Mail –