

Social Media and Social movements in The Arab World

A case study of The 25th January Revolution in Egypt

Professor. Hosni M. Nasr (Ph.D)
Sultan Qaboos University, Sultante of Oman

Extended Abstract:

This paper analyzes the role of the online social networks especially Facebook during the revolution that erupted in Egypt in January 2011. Through content analysis of a sample of pages, groups and events, I discuss how people exchanged information before, during, and after the 18 days revolution that ended by the resignation of former president Hosni Mubarak. The article also analyzes online discussions and media coverage. Particular emphasis is given to the role of the social media, such as Facebook tools and services, which enable citizens to interact or share content online.

The analysis shows that during the revolution, the social media functioned as a political organizer and alternative mass medium for citizen communication or participatory journalism. In this research, I argue that the social media generated an alternative public Sphere for Egyptian activists, which widened the perspectives about the revolution and enabled new kinds of citizen participation in discussing the situation. The success of the revolution in Egypt also showed the significance of the social media as a horizontal form of information sharing. The study concludes that the experience of using social media networks to wage and support the political revolution has important implications on the process of democratization in Egypt.

The January 25th revolution in Egypt was an incredible achievement by its people and a truly inspiring example of the power of peaceful protests. Meanwhile a debate continues to rage as to the exact role played by social media.

The call for a Day of Rage on January 25, 2011 that ignited the Egyptian revolution originated from a Facebook page. Many have since asked: Is this a “Facebook Revolution?” It is high time to put this question to rest and insist that political and social movements belong to people and not to communication tools and technologies. Facebook, like cell phones, the internet, and twitter, does not have agency, a moral universe, and is not predisposed to any particular ideological or political orientation. They are what people make of them. Facebook is no more responsible for Egypt’s revolution than Gutenberg’s printing press with movable type was responsible for the Protestant Reformation in the fifteenth century. Nevertheless it is valid to say that neither the Reformation nor the pro-democracy rights’ movements sweeping Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and much of the region would have come about at this juncture without these new tools. Digital communications media have revolutionized learning, cognition, and sociability and facilitated the development of a new generational behavior and consciousness.

Literature and Theory:

Activism is the actions of a group of like-minded individuals coming together to change the status quo, advocating for a cause, whether local or global, and whether progressive or not (Cammaerts, 2007; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Lomicky and Hogg, 2010). Activism can encompass social movements and moments of collective action. Social movements involve a prolonged contestation of authority with interactions between the challengers and power holders (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978), with the end goal of ultimately achieving some kind of social change. Collective action, which Tilly defined as ‘joint action in pursuit of common ends’ (1978: 84), such as a protest or petition campaign, can be employed as part of a social movement, or it can be a one-time event. Whether a long-term social movement or an outburst of action, successful mobilizations depend on the degree of a group’s common interests and shared identity, its available resources, its political power, its opportunities and threats, and the level of governmental repression (Tilly, 1978). In this Digital

Era, access to and familiarity with technology have become an important resource for a successful movement (Rolfe, 2005). In Egypt, what started as an online and offline protest organized via Facebook around Khaled Saeed's murder has evolved into a more general pro-justice and anti-violence movement.

The way in which Egyptians rallied via Facebook to demand justice is characteristic of what Castells (2001) called a 'networked social movement' of the Information Age. This networked social movement was based on cultural values (justice); was a loose and semi-spontaneous coalition relying on internet technologies (Facebook); and was a locally based movement aiming globally (Castells, 2001). Even as Egyptians protested in downtown Cairo City, Facebook users in the United States and Europe organized their own demonstrations, hoping global attention would prompt the US government and the United Nations to get involved. What made this networked social movement unique, however, was that it was not simply a case of activists turning to the internet to assist a pre-existing movement. Instead, the movement originated entirely online and then moved offline – a concept for which much social movement literature does not account.

To better understand how Facebook users mobilized millions of people to participate online and offline, this study employed a framing approach. Entman (1993) suggested that media frames, derived from Goffman's (1974) notion of schemas, define an issue through selection, exclusion, emphasis and elaboration – in other words, frames tell the audience how to think about something. Framing studies typically consider frames at an issue-specific (i.e. topical or episodic) or generic level, including thematic frames such as values, adversarial, consequences, or human interest frames (Iyengar, 1991; Matthes, 2009; Price et al., 1997). However, frames are more than just categories – they organize and structure, helping illuminate meanings embedded within the text (Reese, 2007).

Within social movement literature, Gerhards and Rucht (1992) identified three collective action frames: diagnostic, which define a problem or assign blame; prognostic, which detail possible solutions; and motivational, which incite individuals to act or mobilize. McLeod and Hertog (1999) referred to a 'protest paradigm' way of framing wherein news stories' themes and a reliance on official sources de-legitimize protesters.

Examining Facebook posts and comments allows for a unique ground-up approach to analyzing how Facebook users framed the revolution movement. The way these online posts and comments were framed helps explain how a social movement was mobilized online by posts and comments that pointed out the problem, identified solutions, and motivated people to participate offline.

Methodology:

This research aims to take a closer look at the specific role that social media played in terms of scaling awareness and support among anti-government protesters that ultimately resulted in the Youth revolution and the resignation of President Mubarak.

Based on the preceding literature regarding mobilization, framing, the internet's impact on social movements, and online versus offline activism, this study interrogated the following research questions:

RQ1: Who were the organizers of Egypt's Facebook political movement, and what were their motivations and expectations? RQ2a: When considering Gerhards and Rucht's (1992) three collective action frames, were Egypt's Facebook users more likely to employ diagnostic, prognostic or motivational frames? RQ2b: Which thematic frame was most stressed among Facebook posts and comments: an agency frame, values frame, adversarial frame, or a reflective frame? RQ3: What topical and functional subframes emerged among Facebook posts and comments? RQ4: How is the frequency of users' posts related to the frames and subframes of a post and a comment? RQ5: What kinds of news information did Egyptian Facebook users post? RQ6: What kinds of interactive comments and interactivity between the 'real' world and 'virtual' world did Facebook engender?

Using a content analysis of posts and comments posted to two 25th January revolution -related Facebook pages, and interviews conducted with the page creators, this research examines how the Facebook posts and

comments were framed to mobilize and advance an online revolution that activated an offline movement. In addition to the framing of posts and comments, this exploratory study also considers what role the various interactive Facebook features, such as the ability to 'like' or respond to another user's post or comment, played in the online 'virtual' revolution and the offline 'real' protests that took place in downtown Egyptian Cities. Such research is important because while researchers have studied the development of traditional offline social movements (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992; Gitlin, 1980), or looked at how the internet facilitates social movements (Atton, 2003; Ayres, 1999; Castells, 2001), little has been written about how social media are organizing online activism that moves offline (Wojcieszak, 2009). Further, much is unknown about who uses social network sites, and to what end (boyd and Ellison, 2007). A survey of US Facebook Group users, which suggested Facebook could encourage youth civic and political participation, called for more research into Facebook 'in other contexts and diverse communities' (Park et al., 2009: 733). Few researchers have content analyzed user posts on social network sites, or interviewed the sites' creators, providing a unique opportunity to explore this relatively new interactive medium.

To understand this social movement that began online and moved offline, two research methods were used: depth interviews and content analysis. The interviews, conducted in Egypt, took place in Cairo City during March of 2012 with two leaders of the Facebook movement. Interviews were followed up with emails sent in March and April 2012. Content analysis was used to examine posts and comments posted to two Facebook pages leading the revolution, 'We Are All Khaled Saeed' and 'January 25 The Day of Revolution on Torture, Poverty, Corruption and Unemployment.' The first page was created on June 10, 2010 while the second was created on January 14, 2011. These pages were chosen because they were created before the revolution, their 'friends' lists were most substantive, and their 'walls' contained more postings than other similar Facebook pages. Although most content analyses of social network sites like Facebook or MySpace have studied standard profile information that is input when an account is created, this study examined posts and comments users posted (Stern, 2007; Waters et al., 2009). The total number of posts on the two pages was 43, while the total number of comments was 117662 as shown in table.

Depth interviews were used to answer RQ1, which asked who the organizers of Egypt's Facebook revolution movement were, and what were their motivations and expectations. During the interviews, the two pages administrators were asked why they decided to get involved with the calling of revolution, where they got the idea to use Facebook, and what they believed the outcome of using Facebook would be.

The content analysis used Facebook users' posts and comments as the unit of analysis. A census of all posts and comments posted to the 'We Are All Khaled Saeed' and 'The Day of Anger' pages from June 10 to February 12, 2010, was analyzed. This time frame was chosen because the first page was created in June 11, and the revolution achieved its goal by throwing down President Mubarak on February 11, 2011.

To answer RQ2a, which asked whether Facebook users were more likely to employ diagnostic, prognostic or motivational frames, comments were placed into one of Gerhards and Rucht's (1992) collective action frames: diagnostic (how did the comment define the problem?), prognostic (what solutions were suggested?) or motivational (was the post or the comment a call to arms or motivating?). For RQ2b, comments were coded according to thematic frames: an agency frame (related to participating or inciting action), a values frame (related to high-level abstraction ideals of justice, democracy, national security, patriotism, familial safety, or good of the community), an adversarial frame (portraying the movement as good versus evil, or specifying heroes and villains), a reflective frame (related to discussions of antecedents, consequences, or media coverage), or other (Matthes, 2009; Noakes and Johnston, 2005).

To answer RQ3, which asked what topical and functional subframes emerged from the Facebook posts and comments, posts and comments were placed into the following topical categories: protest/action related, anti-president/government, petition-related, specifically mentioning revolution, media coverage/article/blog, justice/impunity, related to other crimes/problems in Egypt, solidarity with Egypt, Facebook/Twitter related, general encouragement/support for movement, and other. Approximately 100% of the posts and 1% of comments were reviewed randomly to identify frequent topics (Poindexter and McCombs, 2000). The coding

categories represent the most frequently appearing topics. To determine function, coders specified whether the comment primarily conveyed information, called for action, referenced past or future participation in a protest, stated an opinion, sought information, or generally offered support/encouragement.

For RQ4, how frequently users posted comments, comments were coded for how many times the user posted a comment that same day. Users then were divided by how often they posted comments. Those who posted once a day were considered low-frequency posters, those who posted two to three times a day were medium-frequency posters, and those who posted more than three comments in the same day were considered high-frequency posters.

To answer RQ5, which asked what kinds of news information Egyptian Facebook users posted, the media coverage topic variable was combined with a variable coding how many and what kinds of links users posted. Posts and comments that included audio, visual or textual hyperlinks were counted.

To answer RQ6, about the kinds of interactive posts and comments and interactivity between the 'real' world and 'virtual' world Facebook engendered, posts and comments were coded for unique variables unavailable for analysis in static newspaper content. For example, posts and comments were coded as an original post or comment or as a response to a comment. Such responses to an original post are easily identifiable on Facebook pages, as they are broken out in smaller type size. Another interactive element Facebook offers is a feature allowing users to click a 'thumbs-up' icon to 'like,' or endorse, a comment that another user has posted. As such, posts and comments that other users 'liked' also were recorded. Additionally, posts were coded as citizen journalist comments if the Facebook user provided an eye-witness account or photos from a protest.

Discussion and conclusion:

Using depth interviews and a content analysis of Facebook posts and comments, this study explored how Facebook pages mobilized an online revolution in Egypt. Because of the way posts and comments were framed and the way Facebook's interactive features were utilized a sense of community was created that, moved offline to the streets of Egypt.

The depth interviews with the movement organizers showed that the young, educated males who used Facebook to express their frustration with the government did so never imagining that the site would prove to be such a powerful force for uniting hundreds of thousands of Egyptians in protest and prompting a 'networked social movement' (Castells, 2001). Without Facebook, they argued, such a large movement never would have been mobilized.

The content analysis showed the framing, topics and functions of the online posts and comments prompted offline action by emphasizing protests and calling on others to participate and spread the word. Adding further support for Gerhards and Rucht's collective action frames, the study showed that posts and comments were framed in such a way as to motivate others to get involved in the revolution and participate in offline activities, whether attending protests or signing a petition. Further, the topical subframe of most Facebook users' comments was protest-related and the functional subframe was a call for action, again illustrating that the online component of the revolution was focused on generating offline participation. Rather than simply using Facebook as a forum for talking about justice or criticizing the government, users instead posted comments to mobilize an online and offline movement, organize protests, showcase photos of protests, and actively show their support for the revolution. Because of Facebook, millions of Egyptians regularly took to the streets from January 25, 2011, protesting, marching, or demonstrating in front of government buildings until the collapse of President Mubarak's regime on February 11, 2011.

Whereas comments from low-frequency posters emphasized values, comments from high-frequency posters were more about action, emphasizing protest participation. Thus, countering previous research that has contended online activism is unlikely to incite offline action; this study shows that the online Facebook activity of high-frequency posters also translated into offline participation. High-frequency posters likewise

were successful in their attempts to engage others, as their comments, which were more likely to be motivational and a call to arms, were 'liked,' or endorsed, more often. Perhaps these high-frequency posters were more actively involved in the online revolution because they had a wider network of 'friends' or had been using Facebook longer. Comments from high-frequency posters also gave the impression they were more politically savvy, as their comments showed they understood the rules for collecting signatures on a petition, or requesting permission to hold public demonstrations. It follows that Facebook users with prior participation experience would be more likely to be active both online and offline, suggesting that those citizens already active offline are more likely to also be active online, and vice versa.

Analyzing Facebook content also provides insight into how users took advantage of Facebook's interactive elements. Many users' posts and comments included links to videos, photos and texts, such as to non-mainstream news sources that provided alternative coverage of the Egyptians' anger, giving Egyptians a perspective they might not get watching television news or reading mainstream newspapers. Also, Facebook's option for users to 'like' or respond to a comment helped generate debate and create a sense of community and collective identity, furthering the likelihood of users participating offline. Beyond providing content, these links and 'like' functions also serve to attract attention from users, further contributing to online participation and, eventually, offline participation. When commenting on each other's posts – another interactive feature Facebook affords – users referred to others by name. Such interaction can help strengthen ties among movement participants, potentially creating trust and building a community identity that past research has shown is essential for a movement's success. Thus, these Facebook features that allowed for interactivity among users helped create a collective identity that served to push the online movement offline to the streets in the form of week after week of protests, demonstrations and petition drives.

Although few Facebook users acted as citizen journalists, offering their own protest coverage or commentary on the news, arguably this is because the use of social network sites to publish eyewitness news accounts is still a relatively new way of thinking about online social media. Additionally, in a country with a history of repression, perhaps Facebook users were wary of acting as journalists. Still, for those users who did post citizen journalism comments, Facebook provided the means to bypass traditional news gatekeepers, allowing movement participants to publish their own information and publicize activities a traditional newspaper might deem un-newsworthy. Such first-hand accounts of Facebook users who participated both online and offline indicate that online citizen journalists, much like the Facebook interactive features, also contributed to the transition of the online movement to offline action.

This study adds to an understanding of the recent phenomenon of online social media social movements. While previous literature has focused on how the internet facilitates existing movements, this research shows how the internet was used to create offline activism. Additionally, as this is an analysis of a movement in the under-studied Arab World, it brings a new cultural perspective to social movement theories, demonstrating that the presence of collective action frames is not country specific, as the three collective action frames (diagnostic, prognostic and motivational) all emerged in the Egyptian Facebook comments. Also, by examining how often comments were made, what kinds of informational links were posted, the interactive features of Facebook, and the kinds of comments citizen journalists made, this study contributes to burgeoning literature analyzing social network sites' impact on social movements.

As this was an examination of just two of several Egypt's Revolution-related Facebook pages, further studies could consider differences among the various pages. Future research also should compare other social media social movements in the Arab region and the world, exploring Facebook's role in a movement's success. Also, further research could look at the digital divide in online movements, and how social media are impact the knowledge gap.

Thus, this study suggests the internet has the capacity for actually creating – not just enhancing – political activism in the Arab World. This was not a movement organized offline where the internet served merely as a tool to facilitate mobilization. Instead, the interviews and content analysis demonstrated that it was via the union of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians on Facebook that a just and reform movement was born online

and then moved offline. Collective action and thematic frames, the inclusion of links, interactivity among users via Facebook features such as the ability to 'like' a comment or respond to another's comment, and the use of Facebook for posting citizen journalism accounts all seem to have contributed to the transition of the Egyptian movement from the online, virtual realm to the offline, real world. While those Egyptians initially turned to Facebook because of their outrage over the killing of Khaled Saeed video, it is not being too technologically deterministic to contend that while the video was the spark, it was the online Facebook movement that spurred offline protests, igniting a pro-justice/anti-violence revolution that struggles on today.

Finally, describing the Egyptian revolution as the —Facebook Revolution as some analysts and commentators have named it, glosses over the sheer material and moral force of millions of Egyptians who took to the streets, risking injury, disability, or death, to fight for self-determination, basic human rights, dignity, and freedom.

In time, a more considered, in-depth and comparative analysis of the Arab uprisings will necessarily have to attend to how media systems and communication networks have complexly entered into their different and continuing trajectories. This media performance will also need to be situated in relation to the preceding structures of state power, the role(s) of the military and also the organization of political opposition in and across the different societies concerned. Scholars and researchers, some hopefully close to the events themselves, will also seek to address how media and communications, both old and new, have entered temporally into the political struggles unfolding within these different states and also examine how they spatially extended their reach and repercussions across different political jurisdictions and with what impacts. What seems clear, even from the very preliminary discussion in this research, is that today's media ecology and communication networks have played an integral and multifaceted part in building and mobilizing support, coordinating and defining the protests in Egypt and transnationalizing them across the Middle East, North Africa and to the wider world.

Finally we can say, what happened in Egypt was not a Facebook Revolution. But it could not have come about without the Facebook generation, generation 2.0, who are writing, and with their fellow citizens, history.