Online activism and revolution in Egypt:

Lessons from Tahrir

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Executive Summary

It was not Facebook, Twitter or YouTube that brought down Hosny Mubarak. The Egyptian people did that. But this does not mean that social media and internet-based technologies played no role, or that their role was insignificant, as some have alleged. Rather, events in Egypt and countries across the Middle East and North Africa have shown in the 'Arab Spring' that internet platforms and technologies should be seen for what they are: effective tools for the conduct of political campaigns in authoritarian contexts.

This paper is the product of over a year of research by the author and is based upon a wide range of academic and contemporary literature, extensive content analysis of social media and interviews conducted with prominent activists. It seeks to analyze the use of online activism in the Egyptian uprisings of January and February 2011, drawing out the lessons learned in addition to applying them to the wider context of the Arab Spring. It suggests the following key findings:

- Online activism multiplied the impact of social protest in Egypt: it made political action easier, faster and more universal. In the tightly controlled Egyptian political space, social media enabled activists to circumnavigate the regime's repressive structures to convince Egyptians in the online world into taking action in the offline one. This was its main success, for a revolution will always be won and lost on the streets.

- The political uses of online platforms and technologies are extremely transferrable, and are just as clearly seen in the London riots as they were in Tahrir. The first use is as a tool for mobilising citizens by producing material designed to inspire them into action, and to organise their action once recruited. The second is to use online platforms as a medium for citizen journalism to report on the situation.

- To maximize the impact of online protest it is clear that the combination of the above catalytic and scrutinizing uses is required. But the ability to do so is determined by an array of factors, including the domestic political environment and levels of internet penetration, affordability and computer literacy. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the deployment of such uses has varied across the region.

- The use of online activism in Egypt and the wider Arab world has led to the growth of a new kind of political movement that reflects the plural nature of social media. This has enabled a flat leadership model that is difficult for autocratic regimes to combat: such movements are strong in the face of government interference as they are not dependent on a strong hierarchical structure to coordinate their activities.

- In the Egyptian uprisings, social media became a major hub of political activity. In the advocacy of street protest, over 400,000 people were signed up on Facebook. Moreover, throughout the protests Egyptian Facebook users believed that 85 percent of Facebook usage was to organize activism, raise awareness and spread information about events. Analysis of Twitter also illustrates the extent to which the conversation was driven by political

events, with mentions of the hashtag #jan25 correlating closely with total Tweet volumes.

Online mediums have proved a potent tool for pro-democracy elements in the Arab world. Yet, the gains of the activists remain as reversible as they were hard fought. In Egypt, their efforts have still yet to secure a true transition of power, and the online activists of Tahrir are unlikely to become major actors in the new Egyptian parliament. Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition has yet to succeed in bringing down the regime of Bashar al Asad. Indeed, if the work of the online activists is to be supported effectively, it is imperative that its significance is better understood if it is to help prevent the Arab world's spring from turning to autumn.

Online activism in Egypt

Before investigating the growth of online dissent in the lead up to protest in Tahrir, it is first worth expanding a little on the phenomenon itself. Not every Facebook or Twitter user in Egypt is an activist. A glance at many online profiles of Egyptians illustrates that, just like in the UK, the vast majority of 'posts' amount to trivial musings on subjects such as the meal that they have just eaten or their opinions on the latest music releases. Yet, the walls of Facebook and feeds of Twitter have become an increasingly important hub of political activity, and the distinction between the average user and the activist has become difficult to make. Before the entrance of social media in Egypt this wasn't the case – online political opposition was manifested in an extremely diverse and vibrant, but essentially closed, world of committed bloggers and their devoted followings. The user had to go out of his or her way to access the information. This is no longer the case. Egyptian activists have become adept at using social media to build online campaigns, using them to call for action in the offline world.

Today, Egyptians with Facebook and Twitter accounts can receive a near constant stream of news and views on current events at striking speed. Political calls to arms are interspersed with updates on the relationship statuses of friends and the posting of photos from recent trips. But, crucially, the platform has offered such users the opportunity to have their own say on topics and enabled them to share stories, videos and pictures of interest so that they appear on their contacts' newsfeeds. It has made them *participants* in the online campaigns rather than just followers. This interactivity has been a vital ingredient in the campaigns' success. Through the posting and reposting of information, users have brought key issues to the attention of individuals that might never have thought of becoming politically active before. At the click of a 'like' button, a Facebook user can join a campaign. They can also generate their own content to contribute to that movement, be it in the form of comments, videos or pictures. This offers online campaigns the opportunity to expand at breakneck speed, as each time a user 'likes' the group their action will be conveyed on the newsfeed of all of their contacts on the platform, offering access to a near infinite number of networks of contacts.

We Are All Khaled Said: Transforming dissent from the offline to the online world

Egyptian activists showed a sophisticated understanding of the potential of online platforms and how they could use them to their advantage in the build-up to the protests of January and February 2011. Their activities consequently merit considerable attention here.

There can be no doubt that Facebook played a major role in the fostering of dissent and mobilisation of Egyptians in the build-up to the occupation of Tahrir: the date of the start of the protests, 25th January, was first advocated online and spread through a Facebook group. Over a seven-month period activists were able to sign up in excess of 400,000 people to a Facebook group that was used to advocate for Egyptians to take to the streets to protest the oppressive actions of the police, and the regime that they represented.

The online movement formed after a young Alexandrian man, Khaled Said, was beaten to death by police in June 2010. News of Said's death spread quickly online, although the traditional media – heavily compromised by its ties to the state – paid little attention. The police stated that he had asphyxiated on a bag of drugs, yet the pictures told another story. Bloggers posted horrific pictures of a terribly beaten Said, with multiple jaw fractures. Over

a thousand people attended his funeral and a protest was staged outside the interior ministry. It did not take long for the online campaign to be established. Its name, 'We Are All Khaled Said' (WAAKS), summed up the sentiment perfectly: what happened to Khaled Said could happen to anyone. It was started by a young Google executive, Wael Ghonim, who launched an extremely technology-savvy campaign. A website was soon set-up where the cause was laid out. The site worked in tandem with English and Arabic Facebook groups, which were – and remain – the hub of activity for the campaign.

In choosing to campaign against police brutality, WAAKS was a campaign with which Egyptians from all walks of life could identify (Figure 1 offers one of many examples of this). From the outset, Facebook was used as a platform to recruit supporters and get them into the streets to protest. Four silent protests were staged across Egypt in July as the campaign sought to insure that the state enquiry into Said's death didn't fizzle out. By the next month the campaign was starting to garner some attention, with the *New York Times* reporting that WAAKS' Arabic page had over 190,000 members. The following month, Ghonim announced that membership had reached 250,000. By contrast, the English page had barely reached 10,000.

Figure 1: Snapshot of WAAKS English, 20th January 2011

Source: Facebook, 'We Are All Khaled Said'

As presidential election polls loomed in November, the WAAKS campaign decided to call for protests only, for the Arabic group to be mysteriously deleted that same day, presumably by Egyptian security services. The protests went ahead nonetheless, and saw hundreds – not thousands – take to the streets, suggesting that WAAKS was no more able to muster boots on the ground than its online predecessors.

Despite the steady build-up of the campaign over the next two months, it was events in Tunisia that appear to have been the game-changer. The success of Tunisian activists in ousting president Ben Ali motivated many Egyptians to seek to replicate their feat. A seldom-stated fact around the demonstrations is that it was not Ghonim that first appeared to call for the demonstrations on WAAKS. Instead, on 14th January, a YouTube interview of a former Egyptian police officer living in exile in the United States, Omar Afifi, was posted on the WAAKS Arabic site in which he called for a demonstration to show solidarity with Tunisians, the resignation of Egyptian interior minister Habib Al Adly, and the repealing of Emergency Law in Egypt.

A few days later, on 18th January, another YouTube video by a young Egyptian woman, Asma'a Mahfouz, addressed WAAKS members. "I am talking to you to deliver a simple message," she told them, "We want to go down to Tahrir Square, if we still want honour and to live with dignity, then we have to go down to claim our rights on January 25th (Mahfouz: 2011)." Later that day, a link to register for the protests was introduced on the WAAKS Arabic site. Facebook users needed only to list a contact email address to be provided with the information and instructions from the WAAKS administrators on the plans for the protests. If anyone wanted to express his or her own views, an online form could be found to do so. Incredibly, it was only 11 days before Egyptians took to the streets that the protests were first advocated by Afifi and only a week before that when WAAKS started to register participants. The mobilisation in the coming period was unprecedented. By January 17th the WAAKS English page was calling for worldwide demonstrations in front of Egyptian embassies. These started with New York, London, Madrid and Bologna, where protests took place on 23rd January. Yet, it would be misleading to suggest that there was any sense of what was to come following the initial hours of the protest on 25th January. For the next two and a half weeks the world was transfixed by the demonstrations that eventually forced Mubarak out on 11th February. Table 1 provides a brief chronology of the key events.

Table 1: Key dates in the Egyptian uprisings

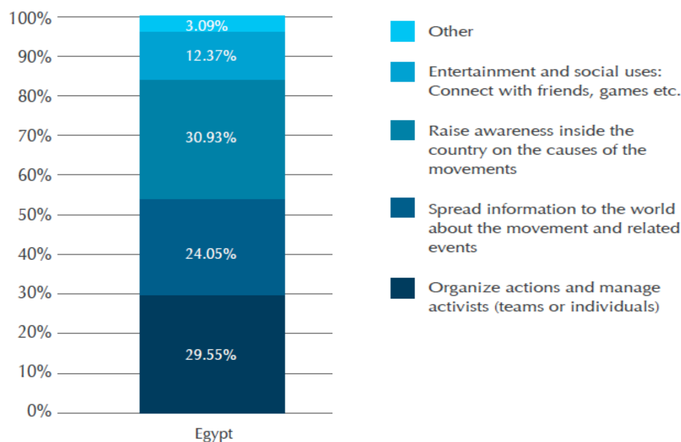
Date	Event
6th June 2010	Khaled Said murdered in Alexandria
June 2010	We Are All Khaled Said' campaign founded
14th January 2011	President Ben Ali flees Tunisia
	YouTube video of former police officer Omar Afifi posted on WAAKS calls for protests on 25th January to demand resignation of Egyptian interior minister and to protest against police oppression.
18th January 2011	Asma'a Mahfouz issues rallying cry for Egyptians to "claim their rights" by protesting on 25th January in Tahrir
	WAAKS begins to register participants for 25th January protests
25th January 2011	Tens of thousands of protesters take to the streets of Cairo and converge on Tahrir square
28th January 2011	Egyptian government shuts down the internet. It would remain down until 1st February
	Known as the 'Day of Rage', this was the bloodiest and most decisive day of the protests, as protesters held on to the streets leading to the withdrawal of the police
1st February 2011	Mubarak announces that he will not seek a further term in office
11th February 2011	Vice president Omar Suleiman announces that Mubarak had stood down and departed Cairo

The tens of thousands of protesters on the streets on January 25th represented a major increase over the paltry numbers in previous demonstrations. In fact, the determining factor of the demonstrations' success was the ability of the activists to attract people on the streets – something at which previous attempts had failed. This was different on 25th January, as the demonstrations that started in different areas of Cairo picked up people as they went through the streets, tapping in to the latent dissent against the regime present in Egyptian society. And the people that they picked up were from all walks of life: middle class and working class, educated and uneducated. The activists succeeded in transforming the online movement beyond the somewhat elitist circle of Facebook and Twitter users to

the mainstream. And, while online activism continued to play a role throughout the protests, it was a significantly lesser one than it had in the build up to events.

Nonetheless, the regime still perceived the internet to pose a severe threat. So much so, in fact, that on January 28th that the Egyptian government took the unprecedented decision to shut it down. The internet would remain down until 1st February. Nevertheless, it was not blocked for the entirety of the demonstrations: online activism remained an important tool for the protesters. A survey by the Dubai School of Government (Figure 2) carried out in March 2011 found that Egyptian Facebook users believed that nearly 85 percent of Facebook usage throughout the demonstrations was to organize activism, raise awareness and spread information about events as they happened. Only 15 percent of respondents believed that Facebook had any social or entertainment role throughout the protests (Dubai School of Government, 2011).

Figure 2: Main usage of Facebook throughout demonstrations



Source: Dubai School of Government (2011)

Documenting developments

From the outset, activists had emphasised the importance of documenting events. Hours before the protest on 25th January WAAKS encouraged its members to become citizen journalists, featuring a short video with the title, 'The camera is my weapon (WAAKS Arabic: 2011).' This weapon worked for both a domestic and foreign audience. For fellow Egyptians it provided irrefutable evidence that state television was lying to them when it told them that the protesters were foreign enemies, criminals or members of the Muslim Brotherhood. For the international viewers, and their governments, it also laid bare the true face of the regime. The walls and hashtags of Facebook and Twitter and the channels of YouTube became the key resources to track events. The result was that the ability of the regime to crush dissent in its traditional manner was greatly constrained. Crucially, unlike in Algeria in 1991 or even Libya in 2011, almost any act of aggression that the Egyptian regime directed against its people found its way on to social media and to TV screens around the world: the ability to bridge the gap between new media and traditional media was vital. It was also not in any way accidental.

On many occasions activists have successfully used Twitter to provide Western correspondents with news on developments, photos and offers of interviews, before they have even sought them themselves. Meanwhile, the live blogs of the major international

newspapers used tweets from activists on the ground in Egypt to inform their transfixed readers – including the author – of developments.

Citizen journalism captured moments of triumph and despair throughout the demonstrations in Tahrir: pictures and videos conveyed far more than words ever could. There can be no doubt that the Egyptian state lost the propaganda war, which is in no short measure to the citizen journalism of Egypt's protesters in Tahrir square.

Lessons Learned

As popular unrest continues to swell in the Middle East, it is important for policymakers to learn the lessons of Tahrir and appraise the role that online activism has played in events. Despite the volumes of news pieces that have commented on this, little attempt has so far been made to draw such conclusions. The following is by no means an exhaustive list, but aims to draw out some of the main lessons from the Egyptian uprisings from which policymakers should take note.

Social media are a crucial tool for the conduct of political campaigns in authoritarian contexts

In the end, domestic factors prove decisive in determining the way in which technology is to be used. But, on the other hand, the qualities that the online platforms possess remain the same. This is where we should direct our focus. First, they are an effective way of mobilising people, a means of communicating with, inspiring and organising a nascent political movement. Second, they provide a means of documenting events on the ground, which is a crucial tool for the breaking of the state monopoly on information and communicating events to the world. A powerful mix of both these catalytic and scrutinizing roles was demonstrated in Egypt: in the tightly-controlled Egyptian political space, social media enabled activists to circumnavigate the regime's repressive structures to convince Egyptians into taking to the streets on an unprecedented scale. It also, simultaneously, brought events on the ground to the living rooms of transfixed viewers around the world in riveting detail, curbing the impunity with which the Egyptian regime had previously crushed dissent.

Successful online activism connects online dissent with offline dissent

Many sceptics of online activism have noted that Egyptian users of social media are predominantly middle class, too few in number and far more prone to online fads than real action that could actually bring about a revolution in Egypt. This is not entirely unfair. But in a society where the media is strictly policed and where it was illegal for more than five people to meet without a permit, social media offered the most available channel for the overt coordination of dissent of any in Egyptian society. Crucially, social media was able to reach *enough* people to get significant numbers into the street and the movement into the mainstream. Once it reached the streets, it collected Egyptians from all sectors of society offering an outlet for the widespread latent dissent present among the citizenry. While internet activism did play a role once the demonstrations had begun, its role was a lesser one, as other modes of communication, such as word-of-mouth, came to the fore as the state's repressive power eroded. Some analysts have suggested that the fact that protests continued without the internet shows that online activism was in fact of little importance. But this misses the point. By getting people into the streets in significant numbers in the first place, the damage had already been done.

Difficulty of combating flat leadership and (dis)organisation

The type of movements that are created online are different from those created in the offline world. This is significant. In Egypt, social media obviated the leadership structures of opposition movements (usually as staunchly hierarchical as those of the government). WAAKS reflected the plural nature of social media, offering Egyptians an opportunity to express their views and *act* rather than simply follow. Top-down organisation took a decidedly more democratic tone, encouraging the input of its members. Organisation for the protests was coherent enough to get people in the right place at the right time, but not much more. WAAKS did lay out some clear parameters ahead of the 25th January protest, such as the need to remain peaceful, but aside from these, members were largely granted autonomy to act as they saw fit.

Indeed, there is a distinct lack of evidence suggesting the existence of any kind of detailed plan to take over Tahrir. In reality, the first point at which WAAKS called for Mubarak's downfall was mid-January. This was not its aim from the beginning. Tactics on the day seemed similarly absent. Ghonim himself later acknowledged that "this was a leaderless movement, there was no organization and no strategy (Ghonim: 2011)" while the prominent blogger Mahmoud Salem – known as 'Sandmonkey' – said that he believed a "collective consciousness" was fashioned in the streets that day (Salem: 2011). Such autonomy was to prove a crucial asset on the ground, enabling a system of flat leadership that gave the campaign a dynamism that proved impossible to repress. The traditional approach of locking-up the leaders of protests to rob protesters of their direction proved of no use in Tahrir. Indeed, when Ghonim was himself imprisoned, the protest movement did not halt. Few Egyptians had heard of him before his iconic appearance on television on 7th February. This absence of clear leadership challenges many established theories on how democratic revolutions can be conducted, and has shown that internet-based technologies have the ability to eclipse hierarchical organisation in favour of networked organisational forms that are robust in the face of conflict.[1]

The importance of 'Mobile-isation'

Internet access through mobile phones was crucial for activists on the ground. More easily available than laptop or desktop computers, mobile phones with internet browsing capability enabled protesters to keep open a constant channel of communication through internet-based applications – a process dubbed 'mobile-isation'. Twitter, in particular, was ideally suited to the purpose. Its short 140-character mini-blogs are perfect for posting comments and information on the spot, making it a powerful tool for the organisation of political movements. The interactivity of mobile phones with Twitter applications meant that activists could communicate with the whole community almost instantaneously. Information diffused across Twitter ranged from practical information on the protests, such as weaknesses in the protesters' lines and instructions on how to deal with a tear gas attack, to defiant messages of commitment to the cause and even notices that they were about to get arrested. Information was grouped around the hashtag #jan25, which had nearly 1.2 million tweets in the first quarter of 2011. Activity on the hashtag throughout the protests closely mirrored overall activity on Twitter and is shown in Figure 4.

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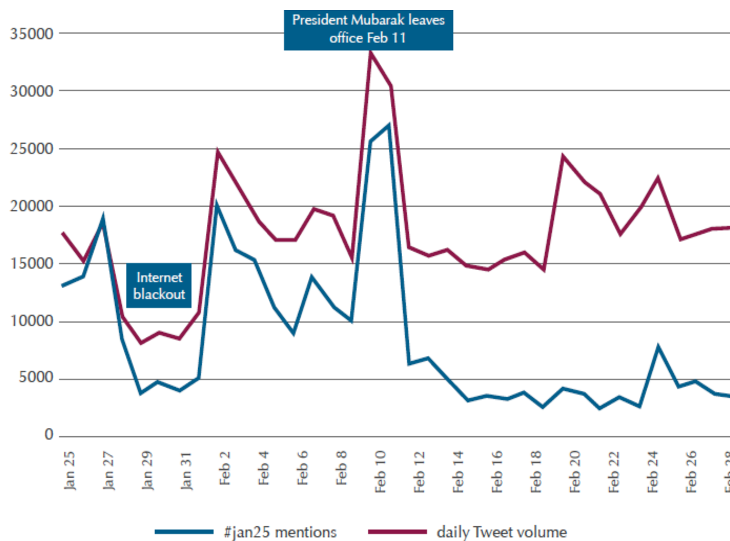
[1] This is something that was originally predicted by R.K. Garret in 2006 as one of the key impacts of internet-based technologies on political movements.

Figure 4: Daily Tweet volume and mentions of #jan25 in Egypt



Source: Dubai School of Government

The right tool for the right job

Technologies do not have political philosophies. It is often assumed that the internet is somehow democratic by nature. This is not the case. In reality, it is the way that the user employs the technology that is decisive. This can just as easily be for nefarious purposes – as witnessed in the London riots – as it can be for pro-democracy movements. Nonetheless, it is irrefutable that internet-based technologies were employed to build a democratic and peaceful opposition movement in Egypt. And in doing so, it has shown us clear evidence that certain platforms lend themselves to certain functions. As a tool for building and mobilising an online constituency, Facebook is ideally suited to the task. For use in the heat of the battle on the streets, the fast-paced and concise format of Twitter is better disposed. Yet, online platforms rarely serve just one such function. The discussions on the establishment of the WAAKS Facebook group took place on Twitter, for example. Indeed, interactivity between platforms is demanded by internet users today. YouTube videos and Flickr photos were posted on Facebook by WAAKS, and the group used Microsoft Excel to register participants for the January 25th protest.

Relating the Egyptian experience to the Arab Spring

The ways that online technologies are deployed are determined by the needs and capabilities of users. There is consequently variation in the use of online activism throughout the Arab Spring. Reasons for this include; the domestic political attitude towards the internet, the penetration of the internet, its affordability and levels of computer literacy. There is considerable regional differences across all of these measures. Despite imprisoning several bloggers and online activists in the past, the Egyptian authorities had largely turned a blind eye to online dissent, dismissing it as a phenomenon of little threat. On the other hand, the regimes in Tunisia and Syria took a decidedly more interventionist approach, blocking many sites – such as Facebook – and clamping down on dissenters. In Egypt, this relative leniency allowed the growth of a substantial online opposition community since the

late 1990s that proved to be a mature and effective political actor in 2011. The same cannot be said in Syria or Libya.

A comparison between the numbers of Egypt and Syria is instructive in determining the way in which technology would later be used: in May 2011, the official Egyptian government statistics found that there were over 25 million internet users in Egypt (MCIT: 2011). The penetration rate of Facebook was 7.66 percent in April 2011 (Dubai School of Government: 2011). Syria on the other hand had just under four million internet users in June 2010 (Internetworldstats: 2012). In April 2011 its Facebook penetration was just 1.94 percent, a relatively high number considering that social media had been banned in Syria until February 2011, but not significant enough. Clearly, the growth of an online movement such as WAAKS would not have been possible in Syria before the outbreak of protests in 2011. Even if social media hadn't been banned, the numbers of people with access to the internet was too few and the regime too paranoid to let such a movement grow. The online community is considerably smaller and significantly less developed as a political force. The result of this has been that Syrian activists have used online technologies less as a method of mobilisation and more as a method of documenting the abuses of the state. It was not the internet that got people to the streets in Syria.

Nonetheless, the ability to document events on the ground through online platforms is significant, especially in a closed society such as Syria. With the government not subject to the same international pressures as Mubarak was in Egypt, international news agencies have encountered considerable difficulty in covering developments. The YouTube videos and postings of Syrian activists have, at times, been the only real intelligence that the outside world has been able to gather. But there is a fundamental difference here: in Syria online activism is a supplement to the street movement, but in Egypt it was a part of its genesis.

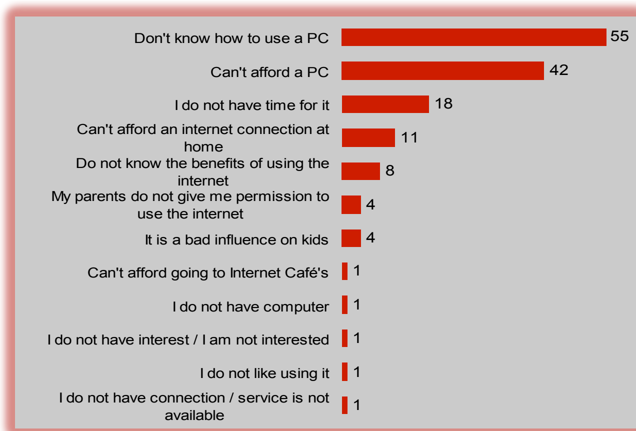
Getting carried away

There can be no doubt that online activism is a significant phenomenon that has had a major impact on the Arab Spring. Yet, we would be wise not to exaggerate its influence. Indeed, despite the aforementioned capacity of online activism to support political activism, it also has a number of inherent flaws. The first, and perhaps most damaging, is an inevitable result of the medium. Open source material makes information as accessible for the authorities as it does for the activists. Some security forces have quipped that there is little need to interrogate activists any more, as all of the information that they need is easily acquired online. In this sense the anonymity of online activity can just as easily work against activists as it does in their favour. Rumours that security services have employed agents to maintain multiple avatars online to undermine and pervert fledgling movements do not seem far-fetched. Moreover, the evidence that Syrian intelligence has learnt from their Egyptian counterparts' mistakes by monitoring Facebook activity since permitting the social networking site to operate has been well-documented by activists.

Equally, whilst the use of the medium by pro-democracy activists is clearly demonstrable, we would be wrong to associate the medium with democracy alone. This paper has emphasized that the uses of online activism are transferrable, and, as a result, such uses remain equally as potent for democrats as they do for others. In the Arab world, Islamist organizations – both moderate and more extreme – have long proved adept at utilising new media and technology.

Finally, any argument that posits internet usage as the spearhead for the revolution is difficult to sustain by numbers alone. Despite the 25 million internet users in Egypt in May 2011, the penetration of the internet remains uneven and subject to socio-economic barriers. Research by BBC Media Action (Figure 5) carried out in March and April 2010 found that 55 percent of non-internet users did not know how to use a computer and that 43 percent could not afford a computer of their own.

Figure 5, Reasons for not using the internet



Source: BBC Media Action

Thus, while internet use is growing fast, it remains strongest among urban, middle and upper class groups who can afford internet connections – either at home or through their smart phones – and that are computer literate. Patterns in social media consumption reflect this: the reach of Twitter in particular can be seen to be very limited. Twitter's penetration rate is extremely low in Egypt at only 0.15 percent – just over 130,000 users – and is largely found in Cairo and Alexandria. To put this in context, the United Arab Emirates had over 200,000 Twitter users in Spring 2011 (Dubai School of Government: 2011).

We are therefore left with a complex picture. Online activism is, at best, only part of the solution. There is no intention here to argue that the Egyptian uprisings deposed Mubarak as the result of online activism alone. This would ignore the major roles played by those who had likely not even heard of Facebook or Twitter. Moreover, as Anita Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany point out in their analysis in the use of online activism in Iran in 2009, 'technologies in themselves are [an] insufficient substitute for political strategy, goals and discourse' (Gholam and Sreberny: 2010). There is no linear relationship between internet access and opposition. Nor can we presume what causes activists will use the internet to support.

Recommendations

Despite the limitations of online activism, policymakers should look for ways to actively support its growth as a check on oppressive and autocratic regimes in the Arab world. But in doing so they must tread a fine line between appearing to interfere in a populist revolutionary movement and allowing reluctant entrenched interests from undermining their role. Nevertheless, there are a number of areas that merit further attention and support:

1. Methods of connecting online and offline dissent should be investigated

Egyptians were successful in convincing their fellow citizens recruited in the online world to protest in the offline one. In the end, all revolutions are decided on the streets and not on the walls of Facebook or the hashtags of Twitter. Policymakers should therefore investigate the links between networked online protests and political participation. For all of the anecdotal evidence collected from Tahrir, it remains unclear how many members of WAAKS actually took to the streets on January 25th. Anecdotal evidence collected by the author found that 16 of 24 Egyptian Facebook users surveyed attended the protests at some stage. If this were to be supported in a more extensive survey, it would undoubtedly be significant. The ability of online activism to influence offline activism is the crucial measure of its significance.

2. Making the internet more affordable, available and accessible

Despite the emphasis here on the ability of the internet to circumnavigate authoritarian political structures, the medium's potential is far from being reached in the Arab World. Whilst the internet is growing at breakneck speed in the region it remains far behind the West. A lack of competition between internet service providers in the Arab world has resulted in high costs that limit the opportunities for many to access the medium and resulted in a substandard service. Computer literacy is also a problem and forms a major barrier to online activism taking root (Taki: 2011). Although it is not possible to suppose that all online movements will be inherently democratic, supporting the development of faster, cheaper and more easily accessible internet services in the Arab world will nonetheless increase the potential for online activism to act as a check on government abuses in the offline world. One potential way of doing this would be to support the development of more affordable access to the third generation mobile phone networks that proved so effective for Arab activists in 2011.

3. Supporting the capacity of activists and their gains

For the most part, the societies in which the activists operate remain restricted and political outcomes in flux. The indications are positive in Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Libya. But in Egypt the path remains unclear, and in Syria the regime remains in place. It is important therefore to build the capacity of activists to continue to hold their respective regimes to account. Previously, Arab regimes acquiesced to the presence of online activism because they considered that it was not a real threat to their power. This is no longer the case. Whilst regimes were caught off guard by online movements, it is unlikely that they will be in future. There have already been signs that Arab regimes have recognised the threat that faces them, becoming adept at monitoring and undermining online movements and online activists. Internet freedom is an important issue, and one that does not only affect the Middle East and North Africa, as the current impassioned debate over attempts by the US

congress to legislate on the issue have proved. Any phenomenon that uses technology will move fast. It is important that policymakers do too, lest the gains of the activists be reversed.

About the author

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