

The Role of New Media in Recent Developments of the Middle East: the case study of Egypt

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Abstract

The role and significance of media and social networks in the recent developments of the Middle East proved that communication as the most important factor has an undeniable role in global events. By raising this question that what the position of new media is in the recent developments of the Middle East emphasizing Egypt's revolutionary events, this research has propounded this hypothesis: By covering developments and directing the audience's viewpoint, new media have played an important role in yielding the Middle Eastern revolutions. The main approach of the article is that new media and social networks have acted as efficient instruments for circulating news and information, coordinating and organizing protests and facilitating them by sharing images and videos; and they have paved the way for increasing a new generation of political participation, generally by the youth who used these media. In fact, we focus on examining social engagement and citizen journalism by using social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and texting in order to reach political change and democratic transition in the region, emphasizing Egypt.

Key words: New media, Social network, New developments of the Middle East

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First essay: generalities**1.1 introduction**

Communication is usually mentioned as an efficient factor that plays a crucial role in understanding, analyzing and management of globalization. The reason for this goes back to rapid and increasing change of this sphere which is affected by technology growth. Due to this, nowadays all levels and aspects of human life is more or less affected by technology (Gilboa, 2009: 5). In past two centuries, using communication instruments and technologies in order to attract public opinion and reaching global political goals has gained importance more than before (Motamednejad, 2010: 379). In recent decades, relationship among nations and states has spread around the world as the result of widespread change in communication technologies and the so-called information revolution. Thus media have become the most important source of exchanging news, political and cultural thoughts and the most efficient factors in international relations (*ibid.*, 401).

A great revolution in the realm of telecommunication and globe-range electronics happened in the last decade of the twentieth century as the result of new communication-information technologies such as internet, satellite, cell phone, cable television, computer and video recorders. Among these technologies, satellite and internet are the most prominent ones as they have hugely affected political, social, cultural and economic life of states and nations. Thus the borders among nation-states at different political, economic, social and cultural levels have been faded and vulnerable (Sardarnia, 2009: 194).

Since 1990s, new communication technologies have culminated in empowering new social movements for forming and directing world public opinion and creating new challenges for governments. It can be said that new social movements play a very significant role in the developments of world civil society by using new media technologies (Sardarnia, 2009: 151). By emerging internet and its World Wide Web, the preliminary beds of global public sphere and global citizenship have evolved and they have paved the way for a kind of civil and political active engagement and citizen journalism.

Internet has such facilities as websites, weblogs, and so on. These facilities have culminated in increasing political awareness and expanding civil and democratic attitudes among users and also their political participation and mobilization. It engages marginal individuals

and groups in political and protest activities. Regarding the usage of new information and communication technologies, particularly new media and social networks, the recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa are prominent examples of using these technologies (Hun, 2007: 8-9).

Many thinkers and analysts have examined the recent developments of the Middle East and North Africa from different aspects and angles. Some of them emphasize the role of political groups in these developments and some focus on the role of domestic social, political and economic factors and the role of foreign factors. Others examine the role of social networks and new media in these developments. Therefore given that some authors believe that new media such as social networks, internet, mobile phones, weblogs and websites are the factors of forming a new generation of political participation, mainly among the youth in Egypt, the aim of authors is to examine how new media, particularly social networks covered Egypt's events. Our motivation for dealing with Egypt's events from this perspective is our belief in this fact that information and communication technologies such as cell phones and other new media have played an important role in the conflicts over democracy and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa. In this research, the research method have been documentary and the data and information have been collected by using library and internet sources (Farsi and English articles) in order to examine how social networks and new media affect the recent developments in the Middle East, particularly Egypt.

2.1 conceptual framework

The impact of communication technologies on social and cultural structures has been examined by many scholars. Castells believes that since cultural transmission and flow takes places through communication, the cultural sphere composed of beliefs and behaviors and constructed by history is exposed to fundamental changes as the result of new technologies (Castells, 2005: 386). If we examine the role of communication and new communication technologies in emerging ideologies and their impact on authoritarian systems in developing countries, we will find out that communication and information revolution is in contradiction with authoritarianism and centralism in these systems, and centralist decision-making and management becomes

ineffective as the result of emerging new communication technologies and it forces the state to make its decision-making process more transparent (Boritsou, 2007: 26).

In his book entitled "The Passing of Traditional Society", Daniel Lerner examines the impact of media on tradition and modernization process in the Middle East. He believes that media increase individuals' flexibility and make it possible to adjust them with new circumstances. Besides, media decrease individuals' faithfulness to tradition and make it possible for them to experience and choose lifestyles freely, so media is a major factor in diminishing tradition and transition of society from traditional action and authority to rational ones and cause development of civil society, democracy and public sphere (Thompson, 2001: 253). Regarding developing countries, new information technologies allow that liberal ideals enter the former closed societies. Therefore the collapse of authoritarian regimes accelerates. Technology provides the instruments of preserving privacy and resistance. The more individuals can connect to each other outside of state control and collect information, the more the power of totalitarian regimes for controlling people diminishes and weakens (Guthrie, 2001: 3-5).

On the other hand, quick communication can increase the speed of politics, particularly expectation and demands from official authorities for prompt respond, so it decreases time for reflection and doing precise calculations. If responses are not provided promptly, a major part of population will be disappointed, and if the responses are provided without sufficient reflection, there will be a basic danger in terms of weak enforcement (Wilson III, 1998: 20). Regarding political sovereignty, some believe that new information technology has culminated in decentralization and increasing awareness which have, in turn, made it difficult, if not impossible, for most states to centralize power at their hands (Griffith, 1995: 7).

On this basis, virtual space challenges states' claims about establishing a decisive and obligatory relationship between their citizen and a particular territory (Mostaghimi, 2006: 235). In these circumstances, new media such as internet and cell phone and their related networks (Facebook, Twitter, SMS) play a significant role in political equations due to some unique features (such as their interactivity).

Internet culminates in revitalizing social life by creating new forms of interaction and increasing relations out of networks, providing meeting

place for like-minded people, overcoming time and place limitations, promoting free and democratic dialogues in virtual spaces, reinforcing collective action and so on. Abundance of accessible information on the World Wide Web and easiness of using search engines for finding desirable groups helps people to join their intended organizations and participate in their activities (Wellman, et al., 2001: 438).

On the other hand, cell phones have widespread functions in different economic, political, social and cultural spheres through their Short Message Service (SMS) as one of new communication technologies. Nowadays SMS has seriously attracted majority of people, particularly the youth and political activists as a new solution for accelerating everyday affairs (Scott and Gronin, 2002: 14).

Cell phone plays a significant role in creating virtual social networks because SMS reinforces a social network or creates a new network through establishing relations with other people. These networks have a high capacity and they can broadcast a message in a very short period of time all over the country and among different strata of people (Ameli, 2006: 17).

In general, digital media revolution has changed world political, socioeconomic and cultural relations. Nowadays every mobile phone has been a multimedia due to its camera and sending messages. Internet, TV cameras and satellite channels have connected the entire world. Internet has entered individuals into public sphere more than before. Internet has also accelerated democratizing processes and demand for political participation (Gibson, 2005: 562).

Second essay: media, internet and social networks in the Middle East developments

Widespread change in the concept and function of political and international borders is one of significant consequences of developing information and communication technology. Nation-states cannot expect to control people, goods and thoughts within their borders as before. Previously there was a border whose rationale was for making distinction between two sovereignties, integrating a nation, providing security for states and establishing relationship and interaction among nations. As the result of developing information and communication technology in the age of globalization and emerging cyberspace, political and international borders have lost their previous functions. In cyberspace, there is no need

for physical movements and all actions are taken place by pressing keys and mouse. Cyberspace is referred to a set of connections among people through computers and telecommunication devices without considering physical geography (Veisi, 2009: 228).

As the result of spreading information and communication technology and emerging globalization, borders have faced functional challenges so they cannot control their internal space. Thus the nature of borders has changed (Veisi, 2009: 230).

Popular protests through mobilizing forces by social networks have depicted a clear perspective for technologies' impact on the political and social destiny of third millennium human. But nowadays what makes social networks more important and decisive is that political sovereignties in both democratic and authoritarian states resist against world democratization. At the same time, it should be noticed that social networks and interactive websites in the virtual space can play a crucial unprecedented role in changing social context of the Arab countries and the Middle East, so that as the result of rapid increase in educated stratum, this emerging social class is growing increasingly. The consequence of such a social class is that new elites are produced in society and previous elites' configuration and structure are changed.

In other words, by forming new educated class in these countries, these groups do not limit themselves to traditional media such as radio and newspapers but they satisfy their information needs by using new facilities like internet, and through creating virtual networks in internet, they gain a very appropriate opportunity for organizing and being effective.

Researches indicate that in the Middle East, four social network websites are among the thirteen much viewed websites. On this basis, the role of such websites as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in forming collective protests and networking cannot be neglected (Kebryayizadeh, 2011).

Recent uprisings and protests in Tunisia and Egypt are called "Facebook Revolution" or "Twitter Revolution" due to widespread usage of social networks by activists and protesters. In these networks, texts, images and videos are not uploaded for commercial ends or pleasure. User-generated content (UGC) refers to internet content (text, images, videos and sound clips) that is created and uploaded to the internet by users usually for no explicit financial gain, but rather for enjoyment or

passion. User-generated content is created usually by amateurs, rather than professionals. It includes blogs, video clips, audio clips (podcasts), as well as comments on internet forums, or status updates on social networks like Facebook or Twitter. User-generated content played an important role in the recent protests and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. And User-generated content created on mobile phones was particularly important as it allowed those involved in or witnessing the protests to upload content during the protests and report on events live. Mobile phones also allowed protesters to communicate with others and spread their message. Social networks like Facebook and the micro-blogging platform Twitter were the primary online tools used to disseminate this content (Comminos, 2011: 4).

1-2 using user generated content and social networks in the Middle East and North Africa

While the terms “Twitter revolution” or “Facebook revolution” may not be accurate, the assertions in this regard will continue because these social networks played a prominent role in the developments of Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Bahrain and Libya. These events involved masses of people protesting on the streets, many using mobile phones to organize the demonstrations and to spread their messages. User generated content created during the protests and disseminated over social networking platforms played an important role in the Middle East and North Africa region, but not necessarily a decisive one (*ibid.*, 7).

In December 2010 in Tunisia, Muhammad Bouazizi, a poor peddler set himself on fire in a general square outside a local state bureau. The news of this self-immolation inspired demonstrations in Tunisia and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa. State-run media in the Middle East and North Africa avoid the event or did not report it correctly. At the time, many websites including YouTube Were filtered in Tunisia. Facebook which was not filtered became an important place for spreading the news of Bouazizi self-immolation and uprising in Sidi Bouzid.

Although Twitter was used by few users but it was a tool for spreading the message of protesters. All over the world, many adherents of the events used Twitter and Facebook as the first source of information about Tunisia. The news regarding Tunisia propagated by Twitter inspired many people all over the region. In Egypt, social networks such as

Twitter and Facebook were used for publicizing and spreading the initial protests of 25 January 2011.

The plans and message of the protest were also disseminated through conventional means like word of mouth, photocopied flyers, and email of a PDF file explaining the plans for the protests. User generated content was used to communicate the messages of the protesters nationally, regionally and globally, and to provide live coverage, news and opinions. User generated content helped to initially direct the world's attention to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and subsequently to other countries, influencing the democratic struggles of the region as a whole. The nexus of user generated content and mobile phones presented an important tool for protesters to inform the outside world of their demands, the events surrounding the actual protests and the nature of police, military and civilian responses. Throughout MENA, tools such as Twitter, Facebook and picture and video sharing platforms represented opportunities to stream the truth to power (Comminos, 2011: 8-9).

In fact, the story of Facebook revolution and the role of digital technologies in popular revolts of the Middle East have a specific aspect that should be paid attention to. Facebook is a social network that has played an important role in popular protests in the Middle East and North Africa but it should be considered as a cultural space for a generation, not as a decisive technology. Media have a crucial significance for social movements, and activists have tried all ways in order to use media (Slee, 2011: 10).

The Arab World has experienced a kind of free speech which is entered the political body of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and it has aided to break state-run censorship and information monopoly in these countries. In the Arab World, from Morocco to Bahrain, increasing dynamic and independent social media indicates that Arab citizen spend their time in internet. It is estimated that until 2015, the number of Arab internet users reaches 100 million. By precise examination of Arab social media, websites, weblogs, online video games and digital instruments we can guess that these tools have created the most unprecedented progress in terms of free speech, freedom of communities and access to information in the Arab contemporary history.

The authoritarian regimes of the region usually restrict the progresses of internet in the Arab countries and they are challenging weblogs increasingly. Also these governments have adopted hard measures against

bloggers, journalists, civil society and human rights activists. Hundreds authors, reporters and activists have faced severe punishments due to their online activities. Other challenges and restrictions adopted by these governments relate to internet band width and speed of access. Arab countries are progressing in different speeds. Telecommunications infrastructures, internet speed through increasing band width, mobile internet and optical cable are reinforcing which will be growing due to the requirements of digital economy in future and the young population (the youth constitute almost half of population in these countries). At the same time, technical capacities of Arab states have been reinforced for controlling, filtering, closing websites, disturbing and arresting activists and citizen due to their writings. Notwithstanding, independent nongovernmental websites and critical social groups have resisted against the cyber attacks to their e-mails (Kebryayizadeh, 2011).

Third essay: political conditions of Egypt on the threshold of revolution (until January 2011)

According to an Arab intellectual "in the Arab world, state means everything and monopolizes almost every facility while society means nothing" (Tibi, 1984: 225). True observations about political life of Egypt during past three decades have shown that competition and participation of some parties and associations as in a so-called election are used as a mechanism for legitimizing the state and fixing authoritarianism so they do not enjoy a real content. In spite of spreading party institutions, particularly an associations as symbols of democracy, these institutions are reduced to formal democracy with the least impact on dynamism of decision-making (Sardarnia, 2011: 117). The Egyptian regime permitted a lot of associations to act in order to demonstrate its government as a democratic one. Egypt is a country that enjoys a lot of associations, particularly professional ones. Only Cairo has more than 25 percent of all associations of the Arab world which include 23 trade union, 26 commercial chambers, 21 guild associations and 3 political parties. The number of professional associations is almost 1.2 million. From 1976 to 1981 (second half of Sadat's rule) the highest numbers of associations were registered and the numbers increased from 7593 to 10731 (Al-Sayyid, 1993: 231).

In recent several decades, the government had tactically adopted a kind of guided and highly restricted pluralism as a formal mechanism of

democracy and for political survival of its authoritarian rule (Mohammad, 2007: 106). Examination of mass media in general and publications in particular indicated that due to monopoly of power and accumulation of facilities and authoritarian dominance in Egypt, there was not free circulation of information, and state-run media's access to rents caused impossibility of competition. This is a subject which was mentioned the opponents of the government as a basic obstacle for obtaining democracy.

In spite of existing political parties and registered associations in Egypt, they could not play a basic role in transition from authoritarianism to democracy. One of basic factors of continuing power structure and preventing from empowering civil society is a solid conservative coalition between social forces and classes. The social and class base of Mubarak's regime was a coalition of landlords, military, state bourgeoisie of 1960s and comprador business-financial bourgeoisie (Hafezian, 2008: 109). Such a political structure did not tolerate legal and civil relations between social forces and the government, therefore the dependent and conservative nature of this coalition was a major political challenge against Mubarak's regime until January 2011 (Sardarnia, 2011: 118).

On the other hand, the structure of elite, particularly its dependence and loyalty to the government was one of the obstacles of democracy, it was weakening the civil activists and it was a major factor for continuing authoritarianism. This power structure was practically widening a mainly personal and informal corrupted relationship among political elite in the parliament, bureaucracy and other institutions with Hosni Mubarak (Albrech and Schlumberger, 2004: 378-379).

3.1 new media and Egypt

Most of analysts believe that the main connecting factor of the North African movements is the cyberspace which is created as the consequence of revolution in information and communication technology. Thus some theorists of international relations have called the Middle Eastern recent developments Facebook Revolution or Twitter Revolution or the revolution of internet and satellite. They believe that these are instruments which are used in its best way by popular movements in order to emancipate from cruelty and authoritarianism and uprising against authoritarian systems. Therefore these states did not pay attention to the influence of new communication instruments used by the youth and people or they were not able to control them. The symbol of

these movements and their communicative instruments are cyberspace websites such as Facebook and Twitter; a space that makes it possible thousands of people exchange their information instantly and participate in processing them and get informed about each other decisions so that they can plan. There is no doubt that this great revolution is one of extraordinary scientific achievements of human being in the last decade of twentieth century and past decade (Ghorbanoglu, 2010: 21).

Globalization of communication and development of technology have significant impacts on the Third World, particularly on the Islamic countries of the Middle East that have faced many problems. These developments that have changed beliefs and values at the national level and weakened bordering among states at the international aspect, have created significant contradictions for the Islam World (Feirahi, 2000: 49).

Prior to 1990, most media ownership in the Arab world lay with governments, and most media functioned under strict governmental supervision and control. A number of authors argued that in this era Arab media were mostly controlled by governments mainly to keep lay people uninformed, and thus incapable of effectively participating in political controversies and rational debates.

A new media revolution erupted in the Arab world after 1990, inspired by the introduction of both satellite television channels and the Internet (Khamis & Sisler, 2010). In the 1990s Internet penetration started to spread throughout the Arab world. Although the region generally suffered from being on the low end of the digital divide and faced many challenges, including the lack of human and economic information technology (IT) resources, illiteracy and computer illiteracy, the lack of funds for IT research and development, and the lack of solid telecommunication infrastructures, this situation is rapidly changing, since many Arab countries are currently striving to increase Internet penetration rates (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011: 2-3).

The rise in social media usage in the Arab world followed a rise in overall Internet and mobile phone penetration in the region. A study by Philip Howard, encompassing predominantly Muslim countries throughout the world, shows that mobile phone and Internet penetration has increased dramatically over the last 10 years, with technology adoption rates in these countries among the highest of all developing nations (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011: 3).

Recent research studies indicate that Internet use is increasingly more prevalent among younger age groups within the Arab world, especially the 20 to 30 year old age group, which uses the net more avidly compared to the rest of the population (Abdulla, 2007: 50). This can very well explain why and how new media were effectively deployed by young people in the Arab world to trigger political reform. In Egypt, for example, the 15 to 17 percent of the population who are active Internet users are mostly youth, who were the driving force behind the Egyptian Revolution.

In Egypt social networking, platforms like Facebook and Twitter were used to announce and publicize the initial protests of 25 January 2011. Facebook groups such as "We are all Khaled Said" and "the 6th of April Youth Movement" called for demonstrations on 25 January (Comminos, 2011: 8). The 6th of April was active before the revolution too. Early in 2008, workers at a government-owned textile factory in the Egyptian mill town of El-Mahalla el-Kubra announced that they were going on strike on the first Sunday in April to protest high food prices and low wages. The 6th of April Movement used mobile phones, weblogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube in order to report police extreme actions, organizing meetings and protests, alarming about police movements, and legal support for detainees. But the 6th of April protests also demonstrated the limitations of social media for democratic movements (Rosenberg, 2011). Cyber activists in Egypt used new media effectively to express themselves politically, inform others of abuses by the state, organize protests and acts of resistance against the authoritarian regime, and ensure that their voices are heard and that their side of the story is told. In other words, new media were deployed effectively before, during, and after this revolution as tools for protesters to enhance their agency and capabilities and to exercise public will mobilization (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011: 22).

In sum, 1) the empowerment of protesters was enhanced by social media, which helped to create a type of public commons for free speech, as evidenced by the free expression of views seen in Facebook, Twitter, YouTube videos, and blogs; 2) provided means for people to find and associate with others of similar political views, as seen by their defiant assembly in public spaces organized by social media; 3) provided a virtual space for assembly, as seen by the popularity of —We Are All Khaled Said and other popular Facebook pages; 4) supported the capability of the protesters to plan, organize, and execute peaceful

protests, as seen by the use of social media by the April 6 movement and other activist groups; and 5) allowed the public to engage in citizen journalism, as seen by the proliferation of cell phone-captured images and videos online and in international media stories (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011: 23).

The social media was a powerful tool for mobilizing protests and this role was revealed when the regime felt that it was necessary to cut internet in order to neutralize protesters, in spite of the fact that this damaged economy. But restrictions and internet cut showed the abilities and will of protesters because they resisted against the government's attempts at blocking internet and they found innovative methods for neutralizing the restrictions. This notifies us that in spite of government's attempts at controlling this current, communication technologies have culminated in an unprecedented amount of information across borders (Salmon et al., 2010: 160). These governmental strategies indicate that the regime had diagnosed that the global current of information has a significant role in social change at the popular level and reinforcing public will.

Conclusion

Technical and informational advances in the recent century have spread communication spaces and facilitated the connection of the remotest places of the earth to other places. The era of information explosion along with inventing new communication tools and methods have created a new world which has distinct features compared to the old world. One of these new methods is virtual world with its various diversities, particularly internet. As one of the most important innovations of human being in the recent century, internet has affected different aspects of human life in positive or negative ways. The main objective of internet is to eliminate the geographical distance between human beings in the entire world and create a change in communication and information exchange. In fact, we dare to say that social networks as one of the most influential web-based services have created a dramatic change in the social system of different countries of the world.

The role and significance of media and social networks in the recent developments of the Middle East and North Africa proved that nowadays these communication tools have an undeniable role as the most important factor and stimulation in the world developments. These networks had a

significant role in yielding Egypt and Tunisia revolutions through on-time covering developments and directing the audiences' viewpoints. People's will is an undeniable reality which was efficient in yielding the revolutions but it is not exaggerating to claim that social networks and cyberspace in general were one of the most important factors in yielding Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions.

Although the role and impact of new media, discussed in this article, are not the necessary conditions for recent developments in Egypt, even in the Middle East countries, and they are the result of many other problems such as humiliation of people, economic recession, unemployed educated strata and formation of new elite, but the recent revolution of Egypt indicates that media have played a crucial role in organizing strikes, syndicates and communities. The exact example is Hosni Mubarak's attempt at blocking internet access in order to prevent from forming meetings (Egyptian government had found out the impact of these media in formation of anti-governmental gatherings thus it broadcasted its announcements regarding prohibition of gatherings and state of emergency in the social networks).

Thus we cannot ignore the role of such websites as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in formation of virtual social networks and ultimately formation of collective protests and network-building in society. The impact of these media in collecting popular aids and supports during the Egyptian revolution was so considerable that Thomas Freidman, the American journalist called them "virtual mosque" versus "real mosques".

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