Social Media and Power Relations during the Arab Spring Revolutions
with Comparative Focus on Egypt and Tunisia

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INTRODUCTION & A BRIEF DISCUSSION ON ORGANIZATION

This paper has grown out of an earlier work that I completed as an undergraduate anthropology student. In 2011, I wrote a more journalistic and speculative paper on the Arab Spring Revolutions as they were unfolding and hypothesized that unrest in the Middle East contributed to the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States. I argued that the reason this quick transfer of revolutionary theory was possible was due to the utilization of social media sites—the first time that social media was used to such a large scale for revolutionary activity.

The first section of this paper utilizes my original paper from 2011. This section provides a brief historical account of what happened in Egypt and Tunisia as well as some basic principles for how social scientists look at—and analyze—the transfer of information through social media.

The second section of this paper is mostly an analysis of what happened. It applies several theories of change and offers a comparison between the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia; the former falling back into a regime similar to when Mubarak ruled and the latter having a relative success story.

SECTION 1

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The Egyptian Uprising in 2011

THE MATCH THAT STRUCK THE FLAME OF REVOLUTION

On December 17, 2010, a man in Tunisia set himself on fire. Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26 year old street vender, was selling fruit from his cart without a license, a common practice in Tunisian streets. A police officer approached Bouazizi and confiscated his scale. This had happened frequently to Bouazizi; the officer expected to receive a bribe. This time, however, Bouazizi protested. The officer slapped him in the face. Bouazizi attempted to gain an audience with the governor to plead for his scale back but was refused. Instead, he went to a gas station and purchased fuel.

Bouazizi then stood in the middle of traffic outside of the governor's office and shouted "How do you expect me to make a living?" He then poured gas over himself and lit a match. This one action sparked a series of uprisings and revolutions now collectively being called the Arab Spring.

Bouazizi's match strike unleashed a flame across the entire Middle East. Copycat self-immolations and protests began to spring up first in Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen (Raghavan). Each country followed a basic guideline on how protests were carried out. Most started peacefully, although violence became inevitable as state-backed police and military clashed with the protestors. The largest protests usually were organized after the noon prayers on Fridays and were dubbed the "Day of Rage" (White, 2011).

The rate and degree of success among the Arab Spring revolutions has varied. While the reasons for this variation are undeniably complicated, one behavior that continues to have a significant effect on the dynamics of these social movements is the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

ORGANIZING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Until the beginning of 2011, the potential for social media to facilitate change in political structures was theoretical. Social media had, and perhaps still has, the stigma for being a device to collect celebrity gossip as well as the everyday minutia of co-workers and friends. However, after the Arab Spring Revolutions, it showed the world that social media is as effective at facilitating political change as it is at disseminating comical cat pictures.

Political movements and protestors have always inhabited the Internet, but rarely has physical change actually been attained at the scale of the Arab Spring revolutions. Internet

activism and utilization of social media shows “a shift from the immobility of old urban movements of the working class. New social movements, with their do-it-yourself approach to information and communication technologies, have nevertheless mixed old and new technologies, merging virtual and physical spaces into ‘networks of alternative communication’” (Fahmi, 89).

Utilizing this “merging of virtual and physical spaces”, Facebook groups, tweets (messages from Twitter), pictures, and videos on YouTube began to propagate and call citizens to action. On January 18, a video blog was recorded by a 26 year old Egyptian woman named Asmaa Mahfouz urging Egyptians to flood Tahrir Square on January 25, Egypt’s National Police Day, to protest police brutality, end corruption, and bring President Hosni Mubarak’s regime down. Mahfouz posted her video to YouTube and the video went viral worldwide. The Facebook page for the protest helped attract 80,000 attendees.¹ On January 25, tens of thousands of protestors poured into Tahrir Square in Cairo.

This is not to say that Facebook was the only unifying factor or sole method of organization during the Egyptian revolution. However, Facebook was certainly an organizational tool for a core number of activists who then further spread their message using other social media or their own in-person social networks. One way to measure this is by penetration rate, which compares how many native users of a particular social media site there are and measures that against the total population of the country. The Facebook penetration rate of Egypt was relatively low, at a rate of “5.5%, but given its large population, that translates into around 6 million Facebook users, who in turn are connected to a much larger number of social contacts who can be influenced by information from those with Facebook accounts” (Mourtada, 5).

BLACKOUTS

However, Egyptian and other Middle East governments did not always make it easy for people to communicate freely. Complete Internet blackouts—as well as selective blackouts to specific sites (mostly Facebook and Twitter) were utilized by most Middle East countries that had widespread protest and uprising.

The first three months of 2011 saw what can only be termed a substantial shift in the Arab world’s usage of social media towards online social and civil mobilization online, whether by citizens — to organize demonstrations (both pro- and anti- government), disseminate information within their networks, and raise awareness of ongoing events locally and globally – or by governments, in some cases to engage with citizens and

encourage their participation in government processes, while in other cases to block access to websites and monitor and control information on these sites (Mourtada, 2).

The Egyptian government was not blind to the power of social media, and on January 28 shut down the Internet in Egypt in an attempt to curtail protestors from further spreading their message. Internet activity decreased greatly during the 5-day blackout, but surged again after the Internet was restored on February 2 (**Figure 1.1**). Tunisia also experienced its government blocking Facebook and Twitter.

These Internet blackouts did not stop the flow of information from leaving the country, however. Technology-savvy activists immediately began to set up ways to circumvent the attempted information blockade. For example,

when states have sought to deny internet access to particular websites by blocking servers, activists have made use of 'proxy' international servers and 'ghost servers' disguising the networks involved. When Mubarak turned off the internet and SMS services (28 January 2011) for nearly a week, an Al Jazeera producer observed how within days 'clandestine FTP (File Transfer Protocol) accounts were set up to move videos out to international news outlets' (Cottle, 653).

Although an Internet blackout may seem like it would have a negative impact on the revolution and the morale of activists, it seemed to have the opposite effect. When Facebook users were polled, 56.35% in Egypt and 59.05% in Tunisia² said the "main impact of blocking the Internet was a positive one for the social movements, spurring people to be more active, decisive and to find ways to be more creative about communicating and organizing" (Mourtada, 6).

SPREADING THE REVOLUTION LOCALLY AND ABROAD

In an area of the world where state-sponsored journalism reigns supreme, social media helped show alternative viewpoints to not only the citizens of their respective countries, but also the rest of the world. "New social media – YouTube, Twitter, Facebook – along with online bloggers and mobile telephony, all played an important role in communicating, coordinating and channelling this rising tide of opposition and variously managed to bypass state controlled national media as they propelled images and ideas of resistance and mass defiance across the Middle East and North Africa" (Cottle, 648).

Images, videos, tweets and status' flooded from protest sites showing police brutality as well

as violence between pro- and anti-government protestors. These updates came amid state-sponsored reports that there was no violence and the police were protecting the protestors.

There are conflicting reports on the role social media played in information dispersal both in-country and abroad. For example, some say that social media, especially Twitter, played a large role in dissemination of information to the outside world, but did little in helping spread revolutionary fervor within the country of origin. This is “according to The George Washington University researchers who did a comprehensive study of Tweets about the Egyptian and Libyan uprisings between January and March. According to that study, more than 75 percent of people who clicked on embedded Twitter links related to the uprisings were from outside the Arab world” (Marks). However, compared to research done by the Arab Social Media report, 88.10% of those polled in Tunisia and an astounding 94.29% in Egypt got their information and news on events during the civil movement from “social media sources (social networking sites: Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc...)” (Mourtada, 8) (**Figure 1.2**).

Once the Internet blackouts started to hit, activists relied even heavier on social media networks to stay informed and report on what was going on within the country. Conventional media and the rest of the world also relied on these ‘hacktivists’ (hacker-activists) to get information out of the country. “While accredited members of the media struggled to communicate and coordinate, street protestors were using land lines to call supporters, who translated and published their accounts on Twitter for an international audience hungry for news of the unfolding events” (Ishani).

Social media also provided the activists with something else: emotional humanization. People from around the world were able to follow, subscribe, and check up on actual protestors. We were able to watch their victories and struggles, their joy and sadness, their humanity and violence. Pictures, videos, and constant text updates, to the amount of 252,000 tweets per day (Mourtada, 16), flooded the Internet. Suddenly, the revolutions became a sort of reality television. In some sense, this is a sickening thought, but in another, it made people thousands of miles away from the Arab world become emotionally invested in the struggle. Simon Cottle of Cardiff University perhaps says it best: “Mass uprising on the streets of Egypt now appeared less distanced, less humanly remote. Visceral scenes and emotional testimonies elicited on the street brought home to watching millions something of the protestors’ everyday despair and democratic aspirations as well as their extraordinary courage in confronting, by non-violent means, repressive state violence. And some, we know, lost their lives” (Cottle, 648).

Examples of tweets from protests on February 2, 2011 in Tehrir Square, dubbed the Battle

of the Camel, in which pro-Mubarak supporters along with armed police (mounted on camels and horses) attacked protestors can be seen in **Figure 1.3**.

MAPPING CHANGES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Another way to show that social media has played a part in the revolution of Egypt and other countries within the Middle East is to map the changes in new users and activity comparing data before the Arab Spring to data during or after the protests. The forefront in mapping this information is the Dubai School of Government's *Arab Social Media Report*. The report maps changes within Facebook and Twitter. The focus on these two social media sites in particular is due to the fact that they have the largest and most active user base. The following data is analyzed from said report.

Facebook

In April of 2010, the total number of Facebook users within the Arab world³ stood at 14,791,972. By January 5, 2011, when protests had already started to break out within the Middle East, the population was up to 21,377,282. By April 5, 2011, the total population on Facebook was 27,711,503, almost double what the Facebook population was a year prior. The country average for Facebook penetration also jumped from 6% to 7.5% and the number of Facebook users in the Arab world increased by 30% in the first quarter of 2011. Interestingly, Egypt "constitutes about a **quarter** of total Facebook users in the Arab region, and has added more users in the Q1-2011 than any Arab country, at close to 2 million new Facebook users between January 5 and April 5" (Mourtada, 9). The time period between January 5 and April 5 was a time of increased protest and political leadership change throughout Egypt. The size of protests increased throughout these months showing that Facebook may have had a hand in the increased attendance.

Twitter

Although the data on Twitter showed less involvement than the Facebook data, it still played an important part during the uprisings. The total number of active users⁴ in the Arab world at the end of March 2011 was estimated to be 1,150,292. As mentioned earlier, these active users

tweeted 252,000 tweets per day, which comes out to 175 tweet per minute (Mourtada, 16).

Another important aspect of Twitter that should be taken into consideration is a convention called 'hashtags'. Hashtags, according to [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com), are "used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages." For example, if you wanted to mark your tweet with #vegan, it would become a link allowing you to see tweets from other users who marked #vegan in their tweet.

You are able to track these hashtags as 'trending topics' on Twitter. "The most popular trending hashtags across the Arab region in the first quarter [January 1-March 30] were **#egypt** (with 1.4 million mentions in the tweets generated during this period) **#jan25** (with 1.2. million mentions), **#libya** (with 990,000 mentions), **#bahrain** (640,000 mentions), and **#protest** (620,000)" (Mourtada,16).

Egypt is 6th in the Arab region in terms of the sheer number of tweets posted during the first quarter with roughly 2,160,000 and their volume of daily tweets can be seen in **Figure 1.4** with spikes and dips corresponding to important events in the Arab world.

Interestingly, Egypt has the third highest number of active Twitter users (in the first quarter of 2011) at 131,204 active users but had a fairly small Twitter penetration rate at 0.15% (Mourtada 16-17).

SECTION 2

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Theories of Change

&

Broad Analysis of the Revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia

THEORIES OF CHANGE

In order to study these revolutions, one must incorporate some kind of evaluative framework. The theoretical basis that I have chosen to use consists of several theories of change. These theories, based on findings throughout the Arab world, are not specific to the Arab Spring Revolutions themselves. Rather, they were developed prior to revolutionary activity utilizing survey data but still fit within the framework of my own revolutionary theory of the Arab Spring.

According to a study by Noi (2013), “political behavior in the Arab world found that people who are involved in civic associations are more likely to extend their involvement to the political realm in both conventional (voting) and unconventional (rallying) forms of participation.” This Political Voice Theory (**Figure 2.1**) is a good initial, broad approach to thinking about political discourse in the Arab world.

It is important to note that the Political Voice Theory of Change is not solely about protest. According to Noi, if one belongs to a civic group in the Arab world, one is more likely to participate in pedestrian political activities such as voting and campaign meetings. However, by holding this same membership, one is also likely to protest, march or demonstrate against the state. Although outside the purview of this paper, it would be interested to consider how one decides which of these two vastly different actions to take. More conceptually speaking, having a membership in a civic group has also shown that one would possess a level of political efficacy—that is, a belief that the average citizen can influence the actions or policies of the government.

Compounded with the Political Voice Theory, it is also important to utilize a theory that is more in line with the topic of this paper—that is, protest and direct action. The Propensity Towards Violence Theory of Change (**Figure 2.2**) relates to how and why people resort to violent demonstrations against the government. Interestingly—but perhaps not surprisingly—this theory was found to be directly tied to economics. According to Noi (2013), “the combination of lack of economic opportunities, rising cost of living, and frustrations over government inaction on these fronts, were primary factors that drew youth to the streets as part of the Arab Spring Revolutions.”

The Noi study—while useful in analyzing theories of change—does have its limitations. It is important to note that there is no disclaimer stating whether or not this study equally polled both genders. In a politically polarized Arab culture, this is a glaring omission and should be

remembered while utilizing these data.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

After establishing two valid theories of change, it is important to look at the broader elements that drive these theories: economics and politics. These drivers of change correspond to each theory—the economy (Propensity Towards Violence) and political (Political Voice)—and explain the global situation that brought revolution to the Arab world in 2011.

The economy around the Arab world was chief among the drivers of change coming into the Arab Spring Revolutions due factors that included global economic deregulation, the privatization of the public sector and massive wealth inequality (Salamey, 2015). Global economic agendas from agencies such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO and the G8 world summit have pushed for deregulation, which has caused serious challenges for closed and/or centralized economies—the economy of choice within autocratic Arab states (Salamey, 2015).

This global trend towards deregulation—combined with vicious global competition which can be seen in **Figure 2.3**—hurt much of the Arab world's favored economic system based on semi-formal sectors. Traditionally protected sectors like agriculture were suddenly facing global competition and sectoral restructuring took place as the global economy turned towards markets such as real estate, tourism, communications, etc. (Kamrava, 2005).

Combining this economic restructuring with the enormous wealth inequality shows why the Arab world was a revolutionary powder keg. According to Salamey (2015), while many of the Middle East and North African leaders—including Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—hoarded personal fortunes amounting to tens of billions of dollars, the minimum wage paid to citizens of their countries was not to exceed \$150 per month. Furthermore, officially reported unemployment prior to the Arab Spring was between 15-20% in many Middle Eastern countries, however, the non-working population was easily double this statistic (Salamey, 2015).

Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, after all, was out of defiance against this very system of economic corruption. His suicidal act of resistance became a catalyst for the Middle East and North Africa's unemployed or underemployed youth who—according to the Propensity Towards Violence theory—took to the streets demanding justice for Bouazizi and themselves.

Political drivers also contributed to Arab Spring and can be attributed to a breakdown of national security as well as corruption. The emergence of transnational armed groups (such as

al-Qaeda and affiliated Islamist groups), increased rivalries within the region (Israel being the largest but also Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia) and miscellaneous international challenges (such as increased counter-terrorism activities after the September 11th attacks and the placement of strategic weapons in the region) all contributed to instability within the Middle East and North Africa (Salamey, 2015). Meanwhile, much of the corrupt leadership from the security apparatuses were draining funds from the budget amid increasing requests to police and military forces by the ruling class to silence dissenters and opposition leaders (Ulfelder, 2005). These escalating requests repeatedly remained unresolved due to lack of resources, funds and unity (Barak, 2010). As is evidenced, corruption played a large role within both the economic and political spheres.

THE MILITARY AND AN ANARCHIST TANGENT

Although the discussion over whether the state continues to retain a monopoly of violence over its citizens remains a contested issue (Wulf, 2006), it is certainly true that the police—and more importantly—the military retain a certain level of escalation dominance. With the military on the side of the state, the protestors can be threatened or beaten into submission; however, with the military on the side of the protestors, the state becomes more pacified and willing to cave to demands. Comparing the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, it seems essential to have a positive relationship with the military in order to have a revolutionary change over the state.

This idea requires a tangential point of contention because much of the scholarship on this subject takes a neoliberal, authoritarian approach to revolutionary theory. Essentially, the ideas agreed upon by world governments and the groups they support (such as the World Bank, WTO, etc.) assert that if a country has good governance, then corruption will be low. The argument is that in a state with good governance, the people have control over the functioning of the state. If a decision or official is corrupt, the people can vote away the bad decision or official. The inverse would also be true in that a state with poor governance would have a higher level of corruption due to the inability of the people to affect change. However, in many Western countries today—all of whom supposedly have good governance—a continuous stream of news stories about corrupted officials seems to show the opposite. A recent Princeton study has recently classified the United States as not a democracy—but rather—an oligarchy (Gilens & Page, 2014).

Still, these flawed ideas lead many to believe that a revolution cannot be successful without

the establishment of a government with good governance. Furthermore, the idea that revolutionaries must have a solidified plan for governance prior to revolution seems to be the very definition of poor governance, since there is a lack of popular representation as well as the perpetuation of hierarchical structures that lead many to revolt in the first place. As Graeber (2015) wrote, referencing the Marxist tradition of the revolutionary: “The revolutionary should never proceed like the architect; he should never begin by drawing up a plan for an ideal society, then think about how to bring it into being. That would be utopianism. And for utopianism, Marx had nothing but withering contempt.”

This brief tangent could certainly be the subject of a paper on its own but I felt that it provides a different perspective on revolutionary theory and how to approach analyzing the Arab Spring. Although some will attribute Tunisia’s comparative success story over Egypt’s revolution as due entirely to the military’s choice to side with the protestors (Gordner, 2012), this is definitely a more complex situation and has more to do with Tunisia’s labor unions and tradition of decentralization.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EGYPTIAN AND TUNISIAN REVOLUTIONS

While complexities exist within the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia, the military did have an important role to play in the revolutions of both countries. In Tunisia, President Ben Ali made sure the military was always on the periphery and played a minimal role in the political affairs of the state (Gordner 2012; Salamey, 2015). Due to this peripheral role, the military was unable to respond with foresight, anticipation or warning that could favorably entrench it within the new power vacuum formed by revolution. Furthermore, the military was largely trained by the US and France and was less authoritarian than other Arab nations. These aspects—combined with the fact that the military was amenable to the large labor unions that organized much of the revolutionary actions—led the military to conclude that the best way that its power could be maintained was to side with the protestors and install a popular government (Salamey, 2015).

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)—Egypt’s military—managed (and continues to manage) roughly 1/5 of the Egyptian economy (Gordner, 2012). This dynamic left little incentive to transfer power to the people or to the Muslim Brotherhood dominated government. SCAF was (and is) literally invested in maintaining a stronghold over key industries and political positions.

The military’s relationship within the political and economic spheres was not the only major

difference between the two revolutions. Prior to the Arab Spring, Tunisia had a high literacy rate, especially when it came to women. According to UNICEF, adult literacy of women as a percentage of males was at 81.4%. This is compared to Egypt's overall literacy rate of 71% with only 59.4% of women being literate (Salamey, 2015). Tunisia was also far more secularized than Egypt and although there were some reservations, Tunisia was the only other country in the Arab world other than Libya to pass anti-discrimination laws against women (Salamey, 2015). However, due to traditional and religion restrictions, women did not have representative equality within the political and economic spheres as men did and this fact—combined with the increased literacy and education of women—contributed to the hatred and revolutionary action against the Ben Ali regime.

The labor unions within Egypt and Tunisia also played a major role in the mobilization of the early revolutionary actions. The General Tunisian Workers' Union—Tunisia's largest labor union with half a million members—mobilized protestors and carried out strikes prior to the revolution (Lee & Weinthal, 2011). Egypt's labor unions also contributed, but due to SCAF's involvement within the political and economic sphere, they were initially repressed and then outlawed completely after the military takeover (Salamey, 2015).

Tunisia's labor unions were empowered by the wide-reach of social media and were able to significantly and forcefully decentralize the political organization of the country and the mobilization of its forces. This caused the authoritarian security apparatuses to become confused and inefficient because they were not accustomed to decentralized direct action available to the Tunisian labor organizers (Mabrouk, 2011). Egypt's labor unions and organizational forces were severely repressed—compared to Tunisia—and so it leads one to wonder whether the Egyptian revolution would have been more successful had there been less authoritarian structures in place.

THE NEW CIVIC GROUP

Social media allowed the youth of the Arab Spring—and the youth of the world during the Occupy Together Movement, #BlackLivesMatter and other social justice movements of the future—to band together within a decentralized, anti-authoritarian virtual civic group.

Instead of the traditional goal of a civic group to set out improving conditions for the street or the neighborhood, youth that participated in the Arab Spring perhaps saw social media as a civic group that could improve conditions to the region or, quite possibly, the world.

Section 1 Figures

Figure 1.1

Figure 3: Egypt: Internet Traffic Between January 28 and February 2, 2011
- Sample of all Google Products¹⁰

(Source: Arab Social Media Report)

Figure 1.2

Figure 11: Where did you get your news/information on the events during the civil movements?

(Source: Arab Social Media Report)

Figure 1.3

(Source: marketinginlebanon.com)

Figure 1.4

Figure 26: Volume of Daily Tweets in Egypt

(Source: Arab Social Media Report)

Figure 1.5

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_Spring)

Section 2 Figures

Figure 2.1

(Source: Noi 2013)

Figure 2.2

(Source: Noi 2013)

Figure 2.3

Trade balance (US\$) of 16 Arab states (2001–11).

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, International Merchandise Trade Statistics Section, 2011, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/trade/data/tables.asp#annual> (6th ed.).

(Source: Salamey 2015)

Notes

¹ The original video can also be seen on this website: <http://boingboing.net/2011/02/02/egypt-the-viral-vlog.html>

² These figures (along with the others in this paper, unless otherwise specified) were taken from the Arab Social Media Report. This was conducted by the Dubai School of Government and was distributed through Facebook's targeted advertising platform to all Facebook users in Tunisia and Egypt. The survey ran for three weeks in March 2011, and was conducted in Arabic, English and French. There were 126 respondents from Egypt and 105 from Tunisia.

³ From Mourtada's *Arab Social Media Report* (page 9): "This section...provides an update on Facebook usage during the first quarter of 2011, continuing from the last report, which provided an overview of Facebook users through 2010. As such, the number of Facebook users in all 22 Arab countries, in addition to Iran, Israel and Turkey, was collected periodically between January and April 2011, in the following age brackets — youth (15-29), and adults (30 and over) — as well as by gender."

⁴ From Mourtada's *Arab Social Media Report* (page 15) "The total number of active Twitter users, tweets and top trends in each of the 22 Arab countries (plus Iran, Israel and Turkey) over the period January 1 – March 30, 2011 was estimated using a Twitter API (application programming interface) specially developed for this research...It consists of sampling a certain number of Twitter users in each country captured across a two week span, and using this sample to estimate the active Twitter population (active in this case being defined as someone who has tweeted at least once within these two weeks – dormant users were not included), the volume of tweets they generated and the top trends for the retroactive three-month period mentioned."

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